

26th February 2023 – Morning Service

First Sunday in Lent

Rev Peter Bradley

Call to Worship

Christ suffered for sins, once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

StF 107 – I sing the almighty power of God

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) I sing the almighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad,
And built the lofty skies. | 4) Lord, how thy wonders are displayed
Where'er I turn mine eye,
If I survey the ground I tread,
Or gaze upon the sky! |
| 2) I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at his command,
And all the stars obey. | 5) God's hand is my perpetual guard,
He guides me with his eye;
Why should I then forget the Lord,
Whose love is ever nigh? |
| 3) I sing the goodness of the Lord,
That filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with his word,
And then pronounced them good. | |

Isaac Watts

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

God immortal, God invisible, far beyond our human thought, we praise you for revealing yourself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three persons, and yet one God. God the Father, you made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you. In love and grace you sent your Son to be our Saviour. To you be all glory and praise. God the Son, for our salvation you came to this earth and lived a life of love. You died on the Cross, rose from the dead, and promised us the gift of the Holy Spirit. To you be all glory and praise. God the Holy Spirit, you come into our lives, transforming, renewing and strengthening, guiding us into Christ's way. You call us into the life of faith and gather us into the body of Christ. To you be all glory and praise. Triune God, we worship and adore you. To you be all glory and praise, now and for ever.

Amen.

God of our salvation, your Son fasted for forty days in the desert and, when he faced temptation, he triumphed over it. We confess that unlike Jesus, we yield to temptation and sin. We confess our preoccupation with material things, with money and food and possessions. We admit that our ears have been deaf to your call and that we have not been obedient to your words. We confess our reluctance to live by faith, our longing to know all the answers. We admit that our spirits have longed for security and that we have not fully trusted in you. We confess our obsession with greatness and strength, with wealth and renown and success, with sham celebrity. We admit that our eyes have been dazzled by power and that we have not sought to serve you alone. God of our salvation, forgive us our sins. Lead us in your truth and teach us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Reading: Genesis 2:15-17 & 3:1-7

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'

Now the snake was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, "You must not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the snake, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die."' 'You will not certainly die,' the snake said to the woman. 'For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realised that they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

StF 318 – Christ our King before creation

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) Christ our King before creation,
Life, before all life began,
Crowned in deep humiliation
By your partners in God's plan,
Make us humble in believing,
And, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, forgive our self-deceiving,
Come and reign in us today!' | 3) Word that ends our long debating,
Life of God which sets us free,
Through your body recreating
Life as life is meant to be,
Make us humble in believing,
And, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, in us your aim achieving,
Come and reign in us today!' |
| 2) Lord of time and Lord of history,
Giving, when the world despairs,
Faith to wrestle with the mystery
Of a God who loves and cares,
Make us humble in believing,
And, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, by grace beyond conceiving,
Come and reign in us today!' | |

Ivor H Jones © Ivor H Jones CCL No. 515642

Reading: Matthew 4: 1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.' Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."' Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test."'

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.' Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."' Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Sermon

“Then Jesus answered, ‘Go away, Satan! The scripture says: Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’” Matt. 4. 10

According to Matthew this is Jesus’ second visit to a wilderness. The first was when he went out to be baptised by John. Now Wilderness might mean ‘a deserted place’, but it can also represent the place where poor and outcaste people lived; or even an ‘experience’ of feeling lost, of needing someone’s help to find direction and sustenance. It is a place for thinking things through – of working out how to go about things. If the story of Jesus’ baptism shows us his commitment to his Father’s call, the temptation story shows us Jesus sorting out his priorities for putting that call to ministry into practice.

First of all, he had to realise that his message was much bigger than bread. The idea of Jesus winning popularity by offering bread to his people is rather like a modern political party in opposition promising tax cuts. Popularity can be much more appealing than truth, or facing up to tough issues. No doubt many people in Israel at that time were hungry and needed bread, but if Jesus had taken on the role of provider, his bigger message would not have been heard and it is likely that bread would have been only a start. Other demands would have followed. Pleas for bread would have escalated to other demands, just as today demands for better working conditions leads on to a demand for higher wages, even when, for many, it seems that their wages are already reasonable.

Yes, bread is necessary. But Jesus taught us to pray: Give us this day our daily bread. And he was deeply moved by human need. Indeed, his message of love has a raw political edge. We can only love most of our neighbours – that is, ensure that they have bread – through the kind of society we want for them. But Jesus must put God, first because God the creator is love, the source of all loving and the source of good neighbourly relationships. The love of God is the source of human interdependence and inter-relationships; it expresses the hope that all people will be treated justly, and have enough food and drink. So food cannot be Jesus’ first concern. Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God... words such as You shall love the Lord your God. That is the beginning of all good things. It is not bread but Jesus, the message of God for the world, who is the bread of life.

The next point to note from the temptations is that we must act responsibly. The second temptation is that Jesus should behave as though he were a puppet and God were a puppeteer. No doubt Jesus would have drawn a big crowd if he had jumped off the Temple, and been caught by an angel before he hit the ground. But it is not in the nature of God to rescue people who behave with deliberate foolishness. God must not be put to the test as though whatever human irresponsibility may lead to, God will somehow pull off a miraculous rescue. Human freedom and responsibility have their consequences.

Whether one accepts that global warming is actually taking place because of the effect of greenhouse gases, or not, there are some facts that cannot be avoided. Deserts are increasing in Africa, India and, most alarmingly, in China. So great are the demands on the environment in China that some rivers are drying up, and the effects of pollution are so severe that in many of the industrial areas there is an epidemic of chest complaints and asthma. In India, bore holes are having to be drilled ever deeper as the water table goes down. There are more serious forest fires in various parts of the world than used to be the case. The flooding of about a quarter of the land mass of Bangladesh is now, more or less, an annual event. If we continue to destroy our environment, if we continue to over-use the earth’s resources, if the competition for water from the Himalayas leads to war between China and India (as some observers predict could be the case), or if by 2050 life for many people can no longer be sustained, will God step in and rescue humanity? I think not. Human irresponsibility has its consequences. God is not a puppeteer who will step in to halt the inevitable. Jesus knew that trying to test God was not an option. His teaching, love God and love your neighbour as yourself, was not a pious adaptation of the commandments of the Old Testament; it points the way of responsible, stable and caring citizenship.

The final point I want to make this morning is that there can be no short cuts. The third temptation was to find a way of achieving quick results. There are all kinds of devilish ways that religious people try out to gain influence over others and thence claim a large following. The history of Christianity is littered with the relics of those who have found it more convenient to cut corners, to capitulate to the ways of the world, than to practise the integrity of love. In our own day, some evangelists (and especially in America, it has to be said) have made spurious claims about their power to heal so long as people pay up handsomely enough. Other evangelists have claimed their message was so urgent that unless people responded immediately and unthinkingly, they would be in danger of the fires of hell (were there such a thing!) Yet others have used techniques of emotional blackmail, or techniques that led to hysteria and fear. But neither must we think that these things couldn't happen in this country. They could. Given the decline in church attendance in Britain, the temptation to use short cuts to popularity is real enough. But that is not the way of love. The call to accept and serve our neighbours as brothers or sisters, to seek only good for those around us in our world – even those who have been portrayed as enemies – to feed the hungry, clothe those living in poverty and house the homeless, requires prolonged, honest, creative and loving effort. We might have to stand up to those in authority, as Jesus had to. It might mean that as Jesus suffered for his faith in love, we too might have to suffer for our faith in love.

Worshipping God and serving God does not involve withdrawing from the world, it means putting first the call and ways of God, and working lovingly as God's co-workers in the creation of his kingdom of love, justice and peace. Whatever happened long ago in the wilderness at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, Matthew tells a story that is not simply about Jesus. It is a story about every generation of his followers, including us. We too must work out our priorities. We too, with Jesus as our companion, must learn how to put God, and the ways of God, first.

StF 236 – Forty days and forty nights

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1) Forty days and forty nights
You were fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted still, yet undefiled.</p> <p>2) Burning heat throughout the day;
Bitter cold when light had fled;
Prowling beasts about thy way;
Stones thy pillow, earth thy bed.</p> <p>3) Shall not we your sorrows share,
Learn your discipline of will,
And with you by fast and prayer
Wrestle with the powers of ill?</p> | <p>4) So if Satan, pressing hard,
Soul and body would destroy;
Christ who conquered, be our guard;
Give to us the victor's joy.</p> <p>5) Watching, praying, struggling thus,
Victory shall be ours too;
Angels minister to us
As they ministered to you.</p> <p>6) Saviour, may we hear your voice;
Keep us constant at your side;
And with you we shall rejoice
At the eternal Eastertide.</p> |
|--|--|

George Hunt Smyttan

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, we remember in your presence the sins of your church. We fail to live up to our ideals, we compromise for comfort, we are often too concerned about material things. We seek our own glory. We do not put our trust in you, but trust in our own schemes and plans, in our own strength. Lord, help us to see our priorities, and not to be led astray. Lord, lead us from temptation and deliver us from evil.

Lord, we belong to a fallen world, where your image is marred and your creation despoiled. We seek quick and cheap results and disregard the consequences. The air is polluted and our rivers foul, our land is raped through greed. Help all who seek to redeem this world and to save it from destruction. Give vision to world leaders and to all who are in control of our industries. Lord, make us aware of the wonder and the beauty that is about us. Help us to move towards a better environment.

We pray for our homes and all that goes on within them. We pray for our relationships with each other. We pray especially for all who have found a loved one unfaithful. Lord, lead us from temptation and deliver us from evil.

We pray for all who have suffered through their sinfulness, all who are caught up in vice and crime. All who are drug addicts, all who have been misused or abused by others, all who live below their abilities and ideals, all who are tempted to despair, all who are suicidal. We rejoice with all who have triumphed over sin and death. We give thanks for all who have given us a good example to follow, for all who know the forgiveness of their sins and the gift of eternal life. May we share with them in your kingdom. Lord, lead us from temptation and deliver us from evil. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 254 – Seek ye first the kingdom of God

1) Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia:

Ch) Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,
Allelu-, Alleluia!

2) Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia:

3) We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, Alleluia:

Karen Lafferty © 1972 CCCM Music CCL No. 515642

Blessing

The good and gracious God deliver you from all that is evil, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with you, this day and for evermore.