

A service for Lent 1 – 21st February, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 92 verses 1 to 4

It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD; I sing for joy at the works of your hands. Amen.

We begin with a worship song, written and composed in 1976 by Donna Adkins. I think its simplicity makes it an excellent opening for worship. “singing the Faith” number 6, ‘Father, we love you’.

1. Father, we love you,

We worship and adore you:

Glorify your name

In all the earth.

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

In all the earth.

2. Jesus, we love you,

We worship and adore you:

Glorify your name

In all the earth.

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

In all the earth.

3. Spirit, we love you,

We worship and adore you:

Glorify your name

In all the earth.

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

Glorify your name,

In all the earth.

© Donna Adkins (born 1940)

Let us pray.

Glorious God, Word of light and life, Creator of the universe, we come to worship and adore you in joyful awe, for you bless us with your love, despite our sinfulness.

Throughout history you have sought to draw us close to you, yet we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies. Instead of abandoning us as we deserved, you took human form as Jesus Christ, who not only taught us how we should live, but broke the power of sin and death at Calvary.

We offer praise and thanksgiving for all your blessings: for the good things we enjoy; for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us; for challenges that test us and mould our characters, but most of all for loving us despite our failure to live as you call us to.

Merciful Lord, forgive us for not loving and serving you wholeheartedly, for our failure to love others as we would like to be loved, for the sins we have committed and

the good we've neglected to do. Help us to amend our ways and to walk the path Christ Jesus has set before us.

Amazing God, you hear and answer our prayer, offering not only your pardon, but inviting us to follow you once more. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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.

We continue with another worship song, 'Spirit of the living God', by Daniel Iverson, who was born in Georgia, USA in 1890 and served as a Presbyterian minister for thirty-seven years from 1914. We shall sing the verse twice. Hymn number 395. 'Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me'.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me,

Mould me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

© Daniel Iverson (b. 1890)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live and in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the suffering of our neighbours both nearby and further afield, more often than not as a result of mankind's failure to live as you call us to. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part, however small it is, to heal some of the world's brokenness. We know, too, that so many situations are far beyond our powers to remedy, but they are not beyond yours.

Gracious God, grant your blessing upon all peoples and all races, especially the blessing of peace in countries which are suffering from war, persecution and terrorism. Lord, hear our prayer for the victims of mankind's inhumanity to man. Grant them the support and courage they need to build a new, better and secure future. We pray that the leaders of the world will learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force to gain their ends. May those who govern countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, turn and seek mercy and justice in all their dealings.

Loving God, we pray for our community. Help us answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches and organizations that serve the poor and vulnerable in our society. We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve and support the poor and broken-hearted, both here and abroad. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. May we play our part in building a world where we stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we desire justice for all-comers and always seek the common good; a world where we are willing to work together in mutual trust and to share justly the earth's

resources, rather than fighting over them, bearing in mind COVID vaccines, intended for the Developing World in particular.

Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and wisdom to do what is right whether or not it is popular or politically expedient. We ask a special blessing upon the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe throughout this crisis. Help them cope with the enormous demands that are being put upon them and protect them in their work.

Like Christ, the past year has been a wilderness in which we have been sorely tested. Grant us the might and wisdom of your Spirit to resist temptation and to make Christ-centred choices.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, remember people who are suffering from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your presence in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are living with a dementia, besides their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them in difficult times.

We pray for everybody who face unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time when we are already burdened with uncertainty. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer them friendship and practical support. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....

Loving Lord, enfold them all with the warmth of your love, so they experience the fullness of your comfort, hope and transcending peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Keep us free from harm, help us to resist temptation to sin and may the way we live bring you glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Our next hymn was written during a financial crisis in 1972, when Karen Lafferty was full of anxiety – I presume shortly after she had abandoned her secular singing career, before other sources of income became available. Whatever the cause, she turned to Christ in prayer and sought solace by reading the Bible.

When she saw Matthew 6, she realised that she would overcome the situation with God's help – and she did! Hymn number 309, '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: Chorus:

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: Chorus:

3. Man shall not live by bread alone,

But by every word

That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;

Our Old Testament reading is Deuteronomy chapter 26 verses 1 to 11

When you have entered the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance and have taken possession of it and settled in it, take some of the first-fruits of all that you produce from the soil of the land the LORD your God is giving you and put them in a basket. Then go to the place the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name and say to the priest in office at the time,

“I declare today to the LORD your God that I have come to the land the LORD swore to our forefathers to give us.” The priest shall take the basket from your hands and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. Then you shall declare before the LORD your God:

“My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders.

He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first-fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me.”

Place the basket before the LORD your God and bow down before him. And you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the LORD your God has given to you and your household. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 4 verses 1 to 13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry. The devil said to him,

“If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.”

Jesus answered,

“It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone.’”

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him,

“I will give you all their authority and splendour, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”

Jesus answered,

“It is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.’”

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.

“If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered,

“It says: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. Amen.

Our next hymn was published in the “Penny Post” in March 1856 and adapted by Revd. Francis Pott for his book, “Hymns to the Order of Common Prayer” in 1861, since when it has become almost a default Lenten hymn. Hymn number 236, ‘Forty days and forty nights’

1. Forty days and forty nights

**You were fasting in the wild;
Forty days and forty nights
Tempted still, yet undefiled.**

2. Sunbeams scorching day by day;

**Chilly dewdrops nightly shed;
Prowling beasts about your way;
Stones your pillow, earth your bed.**

3. Shall not we your sorrow share

**Learn your discipline of will,
And, like you, by fast and prayer
Wrestle with the powers of ill?**

4. What if Satan, vexing sore,

**Flesh and spirit shall assail?
You, his vanquisher before,
Will not suffer us to fail.**

5. Watching, praying, struggling thus,

**Vict'ry ours at last shall be;
Angels minister to us
As they ministered to thee.**

© George Smyttan (1822 – 70) & Francis Pott (1832 – 1909)

Sermon “The Temptations of Jesus”. Luke 4: 1 – 13

In our reading from Deuteronomy, the Israelites were instructed to offer their first-fruits to God, not as a way of appeasing his wrath, but in gratitude for walking with them throughout their history, for delivering them from slavery in Egypt, guiding them through the wilderness and settling them in the Promised Land, ‘**a rich and fertile land**’. Their God was compassionate, for despite their repeated failure to trust in his providence during their time in the wilderness, he had still reached out to save them. Now, when the Book of Deuteronomy was finalised, the Jews were either still in exile in Babylon, or had just been freed by King Cyrus. After the destruction of Jerusalem and the sacking of the temple, many Jews were tempted to cast aside their worship of God and to follow the gods of Babylon. After all, many Israelites in Samaria had intermarried with their Assyrian conquerors a hundred and fifty years earlier and had corrupted their religious practices. The words from the Torah would have provided comfort to the faithful, for surely the God who had redeemed them from Egypt would also save them from Babylonian oppression. Thus, the reading directed them to choose to cling to their way of life in expectation that he would act for them.

Luke’s account of the temptations uses wonderful imagery. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he meditated upon his calling as Messiah. He knew that he was God’s anointed, that he had God’s might and backing in all that he would do, yet as both divine and fully human he faced similar dilemmas to us: he had to choose what kind of Messiah he would be when he possessed such power. He had been fasting, so his first temptation was to turn stones to bread to satisfy his hunger. Notice how, each time he tempted Jesus, Satan began by casting doubt on Jesus’ identity: ‘**If you are God’s Son.....**’ How often do we face challenges from others that begin, ‘**If you are a Christian....**’? After all, those words are aimed to shake our faith.

Jesus quoted **Deuteronomy** in his reply, **“The scripture says, ‘Human beings cannot live on bread alone.’”**

The purpose of the temptation was to see whether or not Jesus would use his powers for personal use, or whether his ministry would be to act as a provider of food for all the world, rather than reconciling God and human beings by feeding them the Good News of God’s salvation. Self-interest was out of the question for Christ, as was materialism in place of spiritual fulfilment.

The second temptation was to be able to rule over the world, if only he would submit to worship Satan. Jesus could have used his powers corruptly to raise forces that would not only overwhelm the occupying Romans, but to force everybody to submit to his will, but Jesus had come to reveal the love of God, a love that allows people to make choices, not to oppress and restrict our lives. Once again, Christ quoted Deuteronomy for his reply: **“The scripture says, ‘Worship the Lord your God and serve only him!’”**

The final temptation was to throw himself from the highest pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem, to alight unharmed – **if he was the Son of God**. In other words, Jesus was tempted to use self-serving miracles to impress witnesses and gain a popular following. Christ rejected that idea, because his calling was to change our hearts and minds, not to impress us with cheap tricks. Therefore, he replied, **“The scripture says, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”**

Each temptation offered Jesus short-term gains, much-loved by politicians, but insubstantial and ephemeral in nature. For Christ, there are no quick-fixes: he knew that for the Father’s plan for our salvation to be accomplished, he had to suffer, to be crucified and be raised on the third day, for that is what had been revealed to the prophets. Jesus knew that he could provide material needs without addressing spiritual requirements; he could become overwhelmingly popular by destroying the power of Rome if he used military force, but popularity would not bring people to love God; he could impress people with self-serving gimmicks, but where would be the Good News in that? Our Lord realised what John Newton encapsulated in his hymn “Glorious things of thee are spoken”: **‘Fading is the worldling’s pleasure, / All his boasted pomp and show; / Solid joys and lasting treasure / None but Zion’s children know.’** Thus, throughout his ministry Jesus was patient and obedient to his Father, conquering sinners’ hearts through steadfast love, not by abusing his powers.

As Twenty-First Century disciples, the past year has been harsh and challenging in so many ways: facing both the coronavirus pandemic and serious restrictions on our freedom. In some ways we find ourselves in a spiritual wilderness, perhaps less aware of the power of the Holy Spirit, so these readings offer us a real challenge, for every day we have to make choices, most of which have limited consequences, but some of which are important. Are we following biblical scriptures in our choices? For example, do we buy Fairtrade goods, or follow advertisers’ bidding and buy major brands, or cheaper produce, instead? Do we buy Nescafe products when the company cynically exploits people in the Developing World? Are we sucked into the **‘get as much as you can’** consumerism at any cost – which has resulted in massive personal debt and the last recession – or do we involve ourselves in opposing Third World sweatshops that use children as young as five to produce fashion items and footballs which are sold at inflated prices in this country? Are we prepared to speak up for the downtrodden, the despised and marginalised, even though we might face unpopularity for taking such a stance? Jesus did! At a time when church buildings are closed for public worship, do we choose to make special time for God in prayer and contemplation, so we may answer

his call? Jesus did! This Lent, let us make time to listen to God's will, so we can make the right choices that reflect the glory of Christ in our lives. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by one of the best modern writers, Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith, suffragan Bishop of Thetford in Norfolk. It is set to the well-known melody, James Langran's "St. Agnes". Hymn number 235, 'Christ our Redeemer knew temptation's hour'

**1. Christ our Redeemer knew temptation's hour
In desert places, silent and apart;
And three times over met the tempter's power
With God's word written, hidden in his heart.**

**2. He makes not bread what God has made a stone,
He at whose bidding water turns to wine;
We are not meant to live by bread alone
But as God speaks the word of life divine.**

**3. He will not ask the fickle crowd's acclaim,
Nor flaunt the Sonship which is his by right,
Nor seem distrustful of the Father's Name
Who bids us walk by faith and not by sight.**

**4. He seeks no kingdom but by cross and grave,
For love of sinners spurning Satan's throne:
His triumph seen in those he died to save
Who, to his glory, worship God alone.**

© Timothy Dudley-Smith (born 1926)

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.