

Third Sunday in Lent

Third Sunday in Lent – 4 March 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Wendy Young, of Christian Aid, for her thoughts on the third Sunday in Lent.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

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Introduction

The third Sunday in Lent, almost half-way! This means that some congregation members will be three weeks into following a devotional book, a series of Lent studies or fasting from something they've chosen to abstain from. Christian Aid invites churches to use the Count Your Blessings journey to guide their Lenten reflections, which this year is focussing on the stories of people who have been displaced due to conflict. Not always crossing the borders of their country to become refugees, but no less stranded without the resources or security they need. In the season of choosing to do without, the Count Your Blessings Lent journey helps us to remember and walk in solidarity with those who do not have such a choice.

[Exodus 20: 1-17](#)

The Ten Commandments: In these deep Lenten days we encounter the people of Israel during their forty years of wilderness wandering. In chapter 20 of Exodus they are being presented with the tables of law, the Ten Commandments. As with the beatitudes, these commandments provide an aspirational way to live, something for their community to aim for. Verse two draws our attention to who in particular is giving and who is receiving these commandments.

'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...'

These laws are being given by a liberating God. A God who intervenes in history in order to break down structures of injustice. A God who raises up prophets in order to point out the way of justice and mercy. The tables of the law are not given to destroy but to preserve freedom.

The Ten Commandments are also received by a liberated people. One commentator on the Exodus story has said, 'it will be harder to leave the old ways than to leave the old land'. These tables of law provide direction to a newly liberated people wandering in the wilderness. They are a route map and compass to the way of living in community. And perhaps at this mid-point in our Lenten journey they can help guide us too.

According to OT scholar Walter Bruggeman, The Ten Commandments are not rules for deep moralism. They are not common sense rules designed to clobber and scold people. But rather, they are the most elemental statement of how to organise social power and social goods for the benefit of all the community. They are meant for the common good of all.

Psalm 19

A Psalm that is sometimes regarded as being in two parts, Psalm 19 encourages us to reflect on the inner as well as the external work of God. It is a Psalm that Jesus may have reflected on in the wilderness days as he watched the sun rise and set forty times and was amazed at the incredible expanse of the stars he slept under as well as the work of transformation within.

The same God who created each sunrise and sunset, each starlit sky, also provides the instructions that revive souls, make wise the simple, creates rejoicing in hearts and enlightens eyes. As the seasons change with the sun's apparent movement and the moon provides a rhythm to live by, the laws, precepts, commands and fear of the Lord also provide a rhythm and guide by which to orientate our lives.

Rather than these instructions being presented as in anyway oppressive, the Psalmist describes these instructions for life as more desirable than gold or the drippings from the honeycomb. This is a far cry from the law or word of God as a means to measure, judge and chastise. Would that we could retrieve this degree of delight in our times of worship, each of us finding our souls revived, minds made wise, our hearts rejoicing and eyes enlightened after each sermon.

With this recognition that the external world declares God's glory to the end of the earth and the instructions of the Lord speak to the inner places of our bodies, the Psalmist finds a rising desire to make sure that this outer and inner world are in harmony. Recognising that nothing is hidden from the sun, yet there are parts of his own being that are hidden to him.

Psalm 19 invites us all to pray the words of the [final two verses](#). These are not just the preserve of the preacher before the beginning of a sermon. This Lent we can invite God into the hidden places of our lives, to help us to live with the integrity of heart and mouth aligned.

1 Corinthians 1: 18-25

If the Gospel passage (as we'll come to read later) tells of a literal upending of tables, the Corinthians passage provides a metaphorical up-ending. The very wording Paul uses for an audience well-used to rhetorical questions and eloquent speech will have been in keeping with the sophists, the intellectual philosophers and teachers of the day, but the message he presents was in direct contradiction.

Paul's message is not just another persuasive argument to gain followers; rather he presents a completely contrary message to what has previously been regarded as wisdom and power to this first century Church that he writes to. His message is the cross and Christ crucified, front and central – and to suggest that this was strength and wisdom was ludicrous. The cross was a means of Roman execution for the disreputable reprobates of the day.

To make reference to the cross as 'wisdom' no less than nine times in this brief passage was a direct challenge of the understanding of wisdom held in such high regard in a place such as Corinth. Paul knows his audience; citing Isaiah 29:14 he justifies his argument: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Paul is reminding them that God's wisdom confounds conventional wisdom.

It is not just another form of wisdom to be followed or to be chosen from amongst a marketplace of intellectual arguments, this is a table-turning perspective on what is wise, foolish, weak and strong and a call to follow a completely different ethic in the world.

[John 2: 13-22](#)

This was the time of Passover, the time when Jews from all over the known world went up to Jerusalem to remember and give thanks for their certain freedom. They were required to pay a Temple Tax and with pilgrims arriving from all over the known world they arrived with all kinds of coins. The money changers were there to exchange these coins. They of course charged a rate for their services, but it was an exchange rate that fleeced the poor.

In order to fulfil the requirements of the law, it was necessary for the pilgrims to make sacrifices. The law was that any animal offered in sacrifice must be perfect and unblemished. The Temple authorities had appointed inspectors to check the animals that were to be offered. There was of course a fee for their services and it was, to all intents and purposes, certain that the animal would be rejected.

That might not have mattered much, but animals could cost at least 15 times more inside the Temple as outside. The poor, the majority, either had to borrow the money to buy their offerings or they couldn't afford them. Their choice was either to get into debt to fulfil their religious obligations, or default on them, find themselves classified among the sinners, and be excluded from the number of the righteous.

This time of Passover, of remembering liberation, was being used to exploit, marginalize and exclude. No laws were necessarily being broken by these Temple practices, but in the very place of divine encounter, the spirit of the law, the love of neighbour, was being denied. Jesus was justifiably angry.

We can presume that the doves flew away, but the cattle and sheep took a bit more directing and so Jesus makes a whip of cords to beat them with to move them on. Then the money is poured out before he finally overturns the tables. This is a thorough clearing out of everything that acts as a barrier to accessing God.

Sermon ideas

These passages are about the spirit of the law: what God wills in the world. Where communities co-exist peacefully and can thrive together, a world where the law enlivens, revives and causes rejoicing. A world where what is valued as wisdom and strength looks like sacrifice and humility, a world where the law is not used against people to stop them coming to God because they think they do not have enough, but where all can come into the Creator's presence and know fullness of life.

The Ten Commandments passage is guidance for community living for the displaced children of Israel and provides a poignant connection to the displaced people campaign that Christian Aid is currently focusing on: www.christianaid.org.uk/ignorenomore. This is a campaign for all displaced people to be included in any of the guidelines the UN is creating for refugees in September 2018. How do we ensure that all are included and that all are enabled to flourish today for the common good of all, which is at the heart of the Ten Commandments?

The Psalm 19 passage often used as an introduction to a sermon might provide a moment for the congregation to pause on the Lenten journey and consider the inner journey of faith as matching what is said. Do our words reflect our hearts? And as this season of Lent leading to Easter is set each year by the cycle of the moon, it may be worth spending some time reflecting on the first part of Psalm 19 and lifting our eyes to the heavens to listen to the glory of God made manifest in the firmament. Barbara Brown Taylor's 'Learning to walk in the dark' provides interesting perspectives on nurturing a 'lunar spirituality' as well as 'full solar'.

The 1 Corinthians passage beckons us to take a long look to where Lent leads us, to the cross. And to consider afresh the scandal of the message that Paul is proclaiming to this 1st Century church. The cross looks like nothing less than humiliation and failure, so to suggest

it was any sort of message at all, let alone a message of wisdom and power, is a complete paradigm shift. It is hard in our current church culture to quite understand the essence of this scandal. But we are invited to reflect on this radical reframing, and to follow this counter-cultural way of being in the world as we fix our gaze on the cross.

On this first Sunday of March, falling in the middle of Fairtrade Fortnight, the Gospel passage in John gives ample opportunity to raise awareness of the need to overturn the tables of injustice that prevent those who labour and toil to provide many of the staple goods that sit on our own cupboard shelves access from accessing the full and flourishing existence that God intends. Every time we spend that little bit extra to buy Fairtrade we are turning over the tables that put profit before people. And living fully is of course to glorify the Creator, to paraphrase St. Irenaeus. You might find stories from the Fairtrade campaign website helpful if you include reference to this in your sermon. <http://fairtrade.org.uk/>

Time with children

Count your blessings

You may wish to provide pens and paper for this activity and have a glass jar visible at the front of the church.

Distribute the pens and paper; the young people may help you with this.

Invite the congregation to think of one thing they are grateful for and to write it on the piece of paper.

Using the offering baskets, get the young people to collect in the pieces of paper and bring them to the front.

Read out some or all of the papers – again, a young person can help with this – and then place it in the glass jar in full display of the church.

Some people practise this from the beginning of each year, creating a gratitude jar so that when they have a difficult or challenging day they can remind themselves of the blessings in their life by returning to the gritudes we have acknowledged.

During Lent, Christian Aid invites each of us to count our blessings; we have so many it is difficult to count them all.

Each day we are invited to read about the experience of communities around the world and consider how our blessings might be shared with them. Find out more about count your blessings and the specific stories for March 3rd at www.christianaid.org.uk/lent

OR

Fairtrade Fortnight

Have a variety of Fairtrade goods from the Traidcraft stall in your church, or your local supermarket if you don't yet have a Traidcraft stall, and a picture of the Fairtrade logo.

Ask the young people if they can remember a time when they were really angry?

Rather than asking them to divulge potentially embarrassing family stories, ask another question.

How many of you were angry because something seemed unfair?

Describe the gospel reading from John. In the bible we read of a time when Jesus was really angry. He was angry because he saw people being left out and not being treated fairly. They were not being given enough money by the money changers and were being over-charged for the goods they wanted to buy. He was so angry he did something about it. He put a stop to the injustice in quite a dramatic way, turning over the tables of the money changers.

Ask the young people if anyone recognises this picture (hold up the Fairtrade logo)? Point to the logo on the packs of coffee/ tea/ biscuits, or other items that you have on display.

Explain that this symbol is as a result of anger.

People were angry when they realised that the tea and coffee that they were drinking had not been bought at a fair price. That means the farmer who grew the tea, or picked and sold the coffee beans had been short-changed, and had not been paid enough money to send his children to school or to get enough for his family to have a good life. And this anger made them take action. Christian Aid and Traidcraft, amongst many others, set up the Fairtrade foundation to ensure that the buying and selling of goods could be done in a different and more just way. Even to this day there are supermarkets who are still trying to short-change hard working communities and farmers.

So keep a look out for the Fairtrade mark when you're next in a supermarket and if you don't see it, find out why not! We need to keep on taking action to make sure that everyone has enough to flourish and to glorify God by being fully alive.

Prayers

Approach

God of the Sabbath

We pause with You on this seventh day,
the end of a busy week for some
and a week that has dragged along for others,
approaching You with our trials and joys.

We come to rest in your presence

We bring to You
our complicated encounters,
the difficult news and reasons to rejoice,
the aches and pains that have hindered us,
the strains from labours and long work hours.

We come to rest in Your presence

Thank You that You meet us here,
Creator who rested on the Sabbath,
Son who wrestled in the wilderness
And Spirit, who comes among us now,
inspire, refresh and guide us.

We come to rest in Your presence

Amen

Confession

Lord our rock and our redeemer,
In this season of Lent we bring our confessions to You;
Sorry for when the meditations of our hearts
have not matched the words of our mouths
and have not been acceptable to You.

Lord, redeem

Sorry for when those on the margins
have been overlooked and ignored by decision makers.

Sorry for when we are complicit
and have ignored or tolerated the unjust practices
of the money changers of our day.

Lord, redeem

Sorry for when those who have laboured hard
have not been given a fair and just price to live well.
Sorry for when we have trusted in the foolishness of others
more than we have followed the wisdom of Your ways

Lord, redeem

Thank You for Your endless mercy
and abundant grace,
in which we place our trust.

Amen

Thanksgiving and Intercession

His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for Your house will consume me.'

If we were to give thanks for our blessings
to count and name them one by one
we would be giving thanks for a very long time
and for that we give You abundant thanks, loving God.
And with this attitude of gratitude
we bring before You those never far from Your heart
and bring them to the forefront of our minds and mouths.

May Your will consume our actions

We pray for all those who are far from home
Who have been displaced because of conflict ,
Who are wandering in a desert of destitution,
Who are longing for a place to call home,
Who are ignored by international regulations,
And left out of decisions that affect them.
May those who are often overlooked be ignored no more.

May Your will consume our actions

We pray for all those who are struggling close to home
Who have been unsettled by a change of circumstances,
Who are wandering in a desert of insecurity,

Who are longing for a job, good health or companionship,
Who feel overlooked by the rapid pace of life.

May those who are often overlooked be ignored no more.

May Your will consume our actions

We pray for all those who are struggling financially

Who the economic system is stacked against,

Who are wading through a deluge of debt,

Who are finding it hard to make ends meet,

Who are excluded because of unfair trade.

May every table of injustice be overturned.

May Your will consume our actions

In the name of the one we seek to follow

Amen

Musical suggestions

- CH4 10 – “Psalm 19” – you may wish to sing this during the service rather than have it read
- CH253 – “Inspired by love and anger” – echoing the love and anger of Jesus turning the money changers table in the temple
- CH269 – “Beauty for brokenness” – a more gentle approach to the themes of inequality and injustice than the aforementioned, also including theme of sunrise to sunset and the creation theme in Psalm 19
- CH 360 – “Jesus Christ is waiting” – perhaps one to sing after the sermon or prayers of intercession since it is a song of response to follow the one who turned the tables.
- CH382 – “O Sacred Head! Sore wounded” – picking up the focus on the cross that 1 Corinthians draws our attention to and as we journey towards the cross during Lent.
- CH539 – “I want Jesus to walk with me” – echoing themes of journeying through wilderness of Lent, this could be song after the children’s talk
- CH540 – “I heard the voice of Jesus say” – echoing the opening responses related to Sabbath rest, and the journey of Lent.

- CH544 – “When I needed a neighbour” – written for Christian Aid Week 1965 this song speaks to the theme of displacement and the need for community as echoed in the Exodus passage.
- CH557 – “O Love that wilt not let me go” – a hymn that draws us to the devotional time of Lent and draws us again to contemplate the mystery of the cross that 1 Corinthians emphasises.
- CH 685 – “For everyone born, a place at the table” – In the gospel passage the tables that exclude are overturned, this hymn invites us to extend the table so all may be included in the feast of life!