

First Sunday in Lent – Year B

Sunday 18 February 2024

The Faith Action Programme would like to thank Rev Dr Jock Stein, retired minister, for his thoughts on the first Sunday in Lent.

Weekly Worship, based on the Revised Common Lectionary, is for everyone – in any capacity – who is involved in creating and leading worship.

It provides liturgical material that can be used for worship in all settings. Our writers are asked to share their approaches to creating and delivering this material to equip leaders with a greater confidence and ability to reflect on their own worship practice and experience and encourage them to consider how this material might be adapted for their own context.

We would encourage continual reflection on the changing patterns of worship and spiritual practice that are emerging from disruption and how this might help identify pathways towards development and worship renewal.

An archive of resources for daily worship can be found on the Sanctuary First website:
<https://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/daily-worship>

We may not all be gathered in the same building, but at this time, when we need each other so much, we are invited to worship together, from where we are – knowing that God can hear us all and can blend even distant voices into one song of worship.

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Introduction

When material is prepared a few months before the actual service, it is hard to anticipate current events, but Lent is likely to include some broad themes which play out in different ways year by year:

- Our human frailty and failure to deal adequately with challenges like people movements, war-making and climate change.
- Our appeal, 'Lord have mercy'. In Lent (as in Advent) candles can be lit with imagination and significance. In our local church there is a regular quiet midweek evening hour.
- Our recall in Lent of 'the great events of our salvation', while always part of a ministry of word and sacrament, has special meaning when we lose our moorings to the past (and fear excessively about the future), for example:
 - How things that happen are part of a truth that is greater than 'my truth' or 'your truth'.
 - How we experience now something which happened a long time ago (like being buried and raised with Christ, Romans 6:4). It may be valuable, where you can, to introduce testimony.
 - How the journey of Jesus to Jerusalem, and the cross which followed, is something which has meaning for, and which actually *did something for* every person who ever lived and lives, and beyond that for the universe itself – as in the older hymn CH4 398, whose words can too easily be dismissed as beyond our understanding: 'earth and sea and stars and mankind by that stream are cleansed all'.

[Genesis 9:8-17](#)

While humans stand at the climax of the creation story in Genesis 1, they share the same planet as birds and beasts. This chapter reminds us that God looks after all species, a simple but special motive for us to do the same. It is also heartening that God has to 'remember' this covenant; God is not a computer but a living, personal being; and even if, in Calvin's words, God 'lisps' with us in Scripture (talks to us as a nurse would to a child), God's 'lispings' brings God close to us, as we are people who struggle to remember.

Three words immediately stand out (not in text order):

- Flood – two whole chapters, 7 and 8, and the experience of so many today, from dams which burst in Libya to houses built on flood plains in Britain.
- Covenant – a promise initiated by God, given to humans then and now, a promise which makes its own demands on humans. Can we lean comfortably on the ‘never again’ of verse 11, and assume the earth will not be destroyed, or does the covenant make demands on our stewardship of the earth? Is a covenant conditional, unconditional or simply consequential?
- Sign – the rainbow, which has been appropriated in different ways today: by a scientific mentality which reasons that ‘knowing how’ exhausts the world of mystery; by the LGBTQ+ community; and national support for medical staff during COVID-19. All, in quite different ways and for their own reasons, use the sign, whereas in Genesis the rainbow is an everlasting sign for every creature.

[Psalm 25:1-10](#)

This psalm has the same number of verses as the Hebrew alphabet, and is roughly, but not exactly, alphabetical – one thinks of the Muslim practice of leaving something awry in their art, ‘since only God is perfect’, though it may be more helpful just to accept that even in scripture we humans offer to God and others simply the best we can. John Goldingay suggests the psalm was written as a model to teach someone to pray, even if it was also used in worship.

Jewish, charismatic and the more ‘catholic’ expressions of faith typically have more physicality in worship, seeking perhaps to hold body and soul together. It would be natural to accompany verse 1 with the lifting of hands, and Lent – for example with the ‘stations of the cross’ – is a good time to encourage ‘body worship’ for those who are comfortable with it. Verses 9 and 10 are congruent with walking round a church.

Lenten themes include sin and mercy (vv6-7), waiting (v5) and humility (v9). Covenant is mentioned in verse 10. Below is a poem on this psalm I published in *Temple and Tartan*, in case it is of use. It’s a pantoum, where the repetitions slow everything down so the reader has to spend time with the ideas and emotions of the psalm. In verse 7, the writer remembers the follies of youth, and the new things he has learned as he ages. Any poet loves new words, but the new words given involve pain and hurt as well as rhythm and right.

A New Lexicon

Back in my youth, wrapped up and gone,
I was no angel: but it's age
that opens a new lexicon,
puts loss and pain centre stage.

I was no angel: but it's age
and wrinkles make a tender soul,
put loss and pain centre stage
and start to make the person whole.

Yes, wrinkles make a tender soul,
reflect the crooked paths of life,
start to make the person whole
for break and make are man and wife.

Reflect the crooked paths of life,
reveal success, transmute defeat,
for break and make are man and wife,
they share a house in every street.

Reveal success, transmute defeat,
play on my heartstrings and my gut
which share a house in every street
I drive through mindfully; so please,

play on my heartstrings and my gut,
sound blues and rhythm in the glen
I drive through mindfully; but please
deal with me kindly, even then.

Sound blues and rhythm in the glen
where trip wires cross, and boulders roll;
deal with me kindly, even then,
make music in my empty soul.

Where trip wires cross, and boulders roll,
I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Make music in my empty soul

and I will answer with a song;

I'll wear the hurt, I'll bear the wrong.
Back in my youth, wrapped up and gone,
I longed to answer with a song
that opens a new lexicon.

The writer of Psalm 25 seeks integrity, without the emphatic 'I'm in the right' of Psalm 26, which sounds like 'number one' on the Enneagram, while a concern for success and failure mark a 'number 3' who has had to learn to bear hurt, which fits Psalm 25. The psalm is also a dialogue between the simple prayer of a man conscious of his need of help in the midst of enemies or worries, and his strong belief that God can help him.

Athanasius wrote in his letter to Marcellinus that the Psalms become like a mirror to the person singing them, and so the poem speaks of the crooked paths of life which mirror success and failure. 'Heart' and 'gut' are important words in the Enneagram scheme, and do not always live comfortably together when they share a house.

[1 Peter 3:18-22](#)

There is a challenging context here, earlier in the chapter – living with tender heart and humble mind (v8), suffering for doing right (v14), gently giving a reason for your hope (v14) – and our passage resonates with them in several ways:

- Christ suffered for us, but also for all, *including* those who have died and were disobedient.
- Noah's flood prefigures baptism. While in one sense only those in the ark were saved – which seems to contradict point 1 above – when the ark opened up, Noah and his family were given the rainbow sign for all. The Church is indeed the 'ark of salvation', but Christ's work was for the unbaptised as well as the baptised.
- Baptism (like the Lord's Supper) does not simply celebrate Christ's death for us, but His resurrection. We celebrate our own baptism and what it means, not just as a cleansing from sin, but as giving us a new and holy life in Christ and in heaven (cf. Colossians 3:1-3). A 'good conscience' is literally a 'good knowing of ourselves', which is both humble and happy.

The most unusual bit of this passage – unique in the Bible, I think – is the idea of Christ visiting the realm of the dead on Holy Saturday. In His life with us, in the stories of the Gospels we find Jesus ‘descending’ to be with us in our sin shame and despair, but in His death He goes even further. ‘Jesus did not skim death, He entered fully into it.’ (See Gerrit Dawson’s *Raising Adam* – available www.handseypress.co.uk – for a profound look at this.)

Mark 1:9-15

Mark uses fewer and often more vigorous words than the other gospels. One notes here: the heavens were *torn apart* (v10), *well pleased*, which could be translated as ‘delighted’ (v11), *immediately* (v12) and *wild beasts* (v13). Not so much of the ‘meek and mild’ Jesus in this gospel (though it is other gospels which have Him clearing the money-changers out of the temple).

My mind is travelling further than the text with the idea of the sky being torn apart. Quite apart from what this might tell us about the ‘eye witness’ testimony of the gospels, it speaks to me of how this world is both connected to and ‘invaded’ by the next. The incarnation took a huge effort on God’s part. We speak, rightly, of the way God gently slipped into the world at the first Christmas, taking time to grow in the womb of Mary in the person of God’s Son. But it is also high drama – steep drama, deep drama. There is an explosive element, like in the birth of stars, to the breaking in of the Spirit into human affairs. And this same Spirit ‘drove’ Jesus into the wilderness. We sometimes speak about being ‘led’ by the Spirit – should we also speak about being ‘driven’ by the Spirit?

One final violent word – *repent*. Turn round, change. The word is the heart of a sandwich in verse 15: the good news is preached, the kingdom draws near in the person of Jesus, so repent – and then believe the good news. Faith both precedes and follows repentance, because faith is dynamic, not once-for-all but growing and being renewed; to push the metaphor, we never stop chewing that sandwich.

Sermon Ideas

There are some links between the passages (e.g. death and resurrection, baptism, covenant) but this is perhaps a Sunday for choosing one passage and preaching on it. Psalm 25 would introduce Lent well. You could preach on prayer from verse 1, faith from verse 2, waiting from verse 3, but here is another theme from verses 4-5: the way, truth and life may and must fuse to make strong followers of Jesus.

- Walking the right way is a matter of foot knowledge as well as head knowledge. (Think of the importance of ‘muscle memory’ in things like playing the piano.) But it is knowledge, it is not simply ‘doing the right thing’. It is getting head knowledge into the heart, and heart knowledge into the walk. Maturity is a matter of constantly shrinking the distance between them, of letting intelligence into the bloodstream.
- Walking the right way means being led and taught by God. It is a major miracle that the Creator of all should be able and willing to do this, and it is useful to rehearse ways that help us hear from God.
- Walking the right way requires waiting on God . . . and also may involve walking blind, unsure of exactly where we are going, but trusting God to make God’s will plain as we go, *Solvitur ambulando*, as anyone who has been taught Latin might remember.

It is worth collecting biographies of well-known and not-so-well-known Christians to illustrate these points. Many of the older biographies are a bit hagiographical, they ignore the weak points and failures, but can still be useful.

The idea of ‘walking through Lent’ might be of interest. It could be developed in many ways, e.g. walking through a forest, round a lake, up and down a mountain; or taking different kinds of walking gear; or visiting different houses, churches, doctrines, or people; or pilgrimage; or walking as a child, a teenager, an adult, an older person.

Prayers

While it may be useful to simplify words when children are present, in many services one is uncertain exactly who may be present, and so it is desirable to keep it simple on the one hand, but also to be aware that good, even lovely language (and of course silence also) can take people into God’s presence whether or not it is well understood. If you can make language beautiful without being precious, that’s a gift worth cultivating.

At the start of Lent it might be useful to speak about silence and the place that silence may take in the services during Lent.

Call to worship (from Psalm 25)

God leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble God’s way.
All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
for those who keep God’s covenant.

Lord God, faithful in Your love,
we come before You as we are,
to worship You at the start of Lent.
We come before You as we are,
to hear what You have to say about our human journey.

We come before You as we are,
to seek Your help and strength for the week ahead,
and for every week,
through Jesus Christ our friend and saviour, Amen.

Confession

We confess that we have thought too much about ourselves,
and too little about Your ways.
We confess that we have lived too much for ourselves,
and too little for the sake of others.
We confess that we have been taken up too much with ourselves,
and too little with the demands of Your kingdom.

Forgive us when we go the wrong way or the foolish way.
Have mercy on us, and upon the world we inhabit.
Be patient with Your people, and help us to walk wisely and walk well,
for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Thanks

We give You thanks for a world of wonder and mystery,
with so much to discover, and so many ways of doing that.

We give You thanks for the variety of human life,
and for the gospel which has been taken to every part of the world.

We give You thanks for everything good that has happened this past week,
for people whose kindness never meets the media,
for prayers which have been answered,
for situations which have resolved.

We give You thanks for opportunities to praise and rejoice,
for opportunities to learn and to grow,
for opportunities to reflect and be quiet.

We give You thanks for this Lenten season,
and for the One whose season it is.

We give You thanks for all things that make our life simple and special.
Good guys and good gadgets,
good friends and good food,
good leaders and good lives around us.

We give thanks for all who have walked before You in faith, and hope and love,
and especially for those whose path has been part of ours.
Above all, we thank You for Jesus Christ,
who walked before You in trust and in truth,
whose walk has inspired us and given us light,
whose walk has taken Him to death and beyond for our sakes.

Prayer for others

We begin with a moment of silence,
to wonder at the mystery of prayer,
to reflect on our journeys and the journeys of others,
and to collect our thoughts before God . . . *[pause]*

We pray for those in leadership,
that they may bless the life and peace of the nations,
our common life here,
and especially the lives of the poor . . . *[pause]*

We pray the hungry might be fed, in body, mind and spirit,
that the thirsty be satisfied,
that God will hear the cry of those who long for justice . . . *[pause]*

We pray for those we meet each day,
at work or in the street, online or in person,
at home or on the phone . . . *[pause]*

We pray for those who teach, in college and school,
in church and community,
praying that knowledge may build up and not puff up,
and that wisdom might guide the feet of all who walk our world . . . *[pause]*

We pray for those with prophetic gifting,
that they hear rightly, and share rightly,
and that they have a wise community to assess what they say . . . [pause]

We pray for the pastors and elders of our church and area,
that they may serve with unity, with love and with joy . . . [pause]

We pray for one another,
that we grow up in faith during this period of Lent,
that we renew our hope,
that we open our hearts to the deep love of God . . . [pause]

And all through Jesus Christ, in whose words we say together,
Our Father ...

Blessing

May God lead you in paths of righteousness and peace –
and the blessing of God almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with you now and always, Amen.

Musical suggestions

Our [online music resource](#) is on the Church of Scotland website; you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship. You will also find playlists for this week and liturgical seasons and themes on the *Weekly Worship* and *Inspire Me* tabs.

You can find further musical suggestions for this week in a range of styles on the [Songs for Sunday blog](#) from Trinity College Glasgow.

A suggested playlist of [songs from CH4 for use during Lent](#) can be found on the Church of Scotland website.

- CH4 21 – “Lord, teach me all your ways” – Psalm 25

- CH4 119 – “O God, thou art the Father” – a fine, vigorous, old hymn; verse 3 is especially relevant to Lent and Psalm 25
- CH4 120 – “God, we praise you. God, we bless you” – a good opening hymn at any time, verse 3 is suitable for Lent
- CH4 263 – “God of freedom, God of justice” – the reference to ‘Christ who saw the dark of prison’ in verse 1 fits the teaching of 1 Peter 3:19
- CH4 276 – “Wait for the Lord” – a very easy Taizé chant.
- CH4 354 – “O Love, how deep” – a good Lenten hymn, and a suitable closing hymn
- CH4 501 – “Take this moment, sign, and space” – this song speaks to many different themes we find throughout Lent.
- CH4 508 – “I bind my heart this tide” – another good Lenten hymn, with personal commitment and concern for others.
- CH4 634 – “Word of the Father, the life of creation” – new words to a familiar tune, suitable for Lent and for baptism or a focus on children
- CH4 635 – “We know that Christ is raised” – another baptismal hymn which happens to echo strongly both of the New Testament readings. Verse 2 might lead you to make a link between Lent and Easter, otherwise the reference might seem a bit strange

Reflecting on our worship practice

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, the way we worship has changed and we need to reflect on the changing or newly established patterns that emerged and continue to emerge as a result of the disruption.

We can facilitate worship for all by exploring imaginative approaches to inclusion, participation and our use of technologies in ways that suit our contexts. This is not an exhaustive list, but some things we could consider are:

- Framing various parts of the worship service in accessible language to help worshippers understand the character and purpose of each part. This is essential for creating worship for all (intergenerational worship) that reflects your community of faith.
- Holding spaces for reflection and encouraging prayer to be articulated in verbal and non-verbal ways, individually and in online breakout rooms.
- In online formats the effective use of the chat function and microphone settings encourages active participation in prayer, e.g. saying the Lord's Prayer together unmuted, in a moment of 'holy chaos'.
- If singing in our congregations is restricted, we can worship corporately by using antiphonal psalm readings, creeds and participative prayers.
- Using music and the arts as part of the worship encourages the use of imagination in place of sung or spoken words.
- Use of silence, sensory and kinaesthetic practices allow for experience and expression beyond regular audio and visual mediums.

The following questions might help you develop a habit of reflecting on how we create and deliver content and its effectiveness and impact, and then applying what we learn to develop our practice.

- How inclusive was the worship?
Could the worship delivery and content be described as worship for all/
intergenerational? Was it sensitive to different "Spiritual Styles"?
- How was the balance between passive and active participation?
- How were people empowered to connect with or encounter God?
What helped this? What hindered this?
- How cohesive was the worship?
Did it function well as a whole?
How effective was each of the individual elements in fulfilling its purpose?
- How balanced was the worship?
What themes/topics/doctrines/areas of Christian life were included?
- How did the worship connect with your context/contemporary issues?
Was it relevant in the everyday lives of those attending and in the wider parish/
community?
How well did the worship connect with local and national issues?
How well did the worship connect with world events/issues?

- What have I learned that can help me next time I plan and deliver worship?

Useful links

Up to date information for churches around Covid-19 can be found [here](#)

You can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4) and download a selection of recordings for use in worship [here](#)

You can find an introduction to spiritual styles online [here](#)

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