

Music to prepare us for worship – You Lead Us Through, Engage Worship (used with permission under our CCLI)

Call to worship (inspired by Luke 4:1-13)

Jesus began his ministry to the world,
led by the Spirit into the wilderness.
As we begin our Lenten journey, let us be led by the Spirit,
even into the uncomfortable places.
In those forty days, and in that place,
Jesus was faced with hunger, doubt and temptation.
As we seek to follow Jesus, we would be led,
even into the uncomfortable choices.
Jesus left the wilderness, faithful and obedient to God,
rejoicing in the One in whom he trusted.
As we continue on our path to faithfulness,
we will be led by our Christ, rejoicing in the Lord our God.

written by Thom Shurman

I was very surprised to find that Rejoice and Sing doesn't include either of the well-known, (well I thought they were well known!) hymns for the start of Lent – 'Forty days and forty nights' or 'Jesus, tempted in the desert'. I wonder what that says about the URC, that the hymn book used by the majority of our churches doesn't include any specific hymns for Lent? While I was looking for prayers in this book (*Let Justice Roll, an anthology for Lent, Holy Week and Easter*), I found what is called a Hymn for Lent, which has good words, and Gerry at Bridgwater Drive helped me find a well-known tune that fits.

Hymn A Hymn for Lent Tune *Sine nomine* – 'For all the saints... at R&S 658

Jesus, who went into the wilderness
to face its dangers and confront its fear,
hunger and thirst, day's heat and cold of night,
you knew it all - no rest or shelter there.

Jesus, come now into life's wilderness,
where pain and suffering threaten and dismay,
walk with your people in life's harshest days,
give them your courage, take their fear away.

We pray for all who bear the wilderness
of shattered lives and ruined dreams of peace,
for all who cry for justice to be done
that your imprisoned ones may know release.

As in the wilderness, you made your choice,
rejecting cunning, rule of force and greed,
give courage to the powerful and the strong
to dare God's path of love, where you will lead.

by Wendy Ross-Barker, from *Let Justice Roll*, ed. Geoffrey Duncan

Introduction

This year will, hopefully, be my first Easter not in lockdown! So, despite, having been here for over two years, it will be the first time I lead a Maundy Thursday service, and the first time I lead Easter Sunday worship, in person – so please be kind and remember that, if I don't do things the way you usually do them! In 2020, we started Lent, and had some Lent house groups, before we went into

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the first, complete lockdown just before Mother's Day and I remember celebrating breakfast Easter Communion in the manse garden. I don't want to tempt fate, but it looks like we will be here in the church for Easter, and we already have our cross up, which gets added to every week – thank you. On this first Sunday in Lent, as we reflect on what we may be giving up, or what we may be taking on, I wanted to share this poem:

Something for Lent

If you're going to give up something for Lent, what about giving up:

Feeling hopeless about the debt of the poorest countries

Tolerating nuclear weapons and arms trading

Wasting water and other resources

Using the car for short journeys

If you're going to do something positive for Lent. Why not:

Befriend asylum seekers and challenge racist remarks

Make a financial commitment to support third world projects

Buy locally produced organic food and fairly traded products

Spend more time with your children

Ellen Teague, *Let Justice Roll*

Meditation and Prayers for Lent – 4 voices

Gifts incl. Jar for coins for Water Aid

Holy One, all that we have comes from you. Accept our gifts for your work in the world, and in particular during Lent, our coins for Water Aid, and to you be the glory and praise always. **Amen**

Hymn Praise to the holiest in the height R&S 103, omit v 5 and 7

Praise to the Holiest in the height,

And in the depth be praise:

In all His words most wonderful;

Most sure in all His ways.

O loving wisdom of our God,

When all was sin and shame,

A second Adam, to the fight

And to the rescue came.

O wisest love! that flesh and blood

Which did in Adam fail,

Should strive afresh against the foe,

Should strive and should prevail.

And that a higher gift than grace

Should flesh and blood refine,

God's presence, and His very self

And essence all-divine.

And in the garden secretly,

And on the cross on high,

Should teach His brethren, and inspire

To suffer and to die.

J. H. Newman

Bible readings: **Luke 4:1-13**
 Luke 12:22-31

We have two readings from Luke's gospel this morning. The first, from chapter 4 is the lectionary reading set for today, the first Sunday in Lent, about the temptation of Christ. I think we can get very tied up with thoughts of what we will give up for Lent, or what positive activities we might take on, and how they link to Jesus' temptation, when in fact the temptations of Jesus relate to his vocation as the Son of God and are not about being tested for the sake of it, or about giving something up as a sign of holiness. And of course,

fasting for us, unlike many in the world, is always optional, always a choice, and talk of giving things up for Lent, even among people who don't go to church, is a relatively recent thing. When I was a child, there wasn't much focus on Ash Wednesday in the URC; there were no Ash Wednesday services and certainly no putting ash crosses on our foreheads – that was a Roman Catholic tradition, and also not much mention of Lent and giving things up. We seemed to jump straight from pancakes on Shrove Tuesday to hot cross buns on Good Friday, without very much Lenten reflection in between! And this year with the war in Ukraine, it would be perverse to give up food items, or have fast days, if we didn't then give the money saved to a charity that feeds people, be it a group helping refugees, or a charity that helps those in food poverty in the UK. In fact, it would be perverse any year, but current world events so close to home make it more obvious. I don't like to talk about me much in sermons, for fear of blowing my own trumpet – something my father often warned us against, but there was an article in *Reform* this month, that asked what makes a good leader. As you might imagine, there were several different answers, and there are many ways to be a good leader, but one is leading by example – not asking others to do things you are not prepared to do yourself, which is something I try to do. In the past I have sometimes fasted on the Fridays during Lent and given that money to charity. This year, because we will be in Colombia for much of Lent, I won't be fasting, but I have already given a donation to the UN Refugee Agency appeal for Ukraine.

Our reading about the temptation of Christ, starts with Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit and he was led into the wilderness by the Spirit. Throughout Luke's Gospel, the Spirit fills people and leads them into trials, uncertainties, and into the wilderness. John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit in the womb of his mother Elizabeth. By Luke chapter 3, John is in the wilderness speaking out against Roman tax-collectors, soldiers, and Herod, for which he is later arrested. And Jesus has just had the Holy Spirit descend on him while John baptised him. When Jesus has finished his forty days in the desert, he returns to Galilee, 'filled with the power of the Spirit'. Each of the three trials of Jesus by the devil raise a question about power. First the devil tells Jesus to use divine power to satisfy his hunger. The Roman Emperors claimed to be the sons of gods, and that claim gave them power over whatever resources they wanted. They could demand grain from Egypt or extract taxes from their provinces through military might. Their words literally carried the power of life and death over their subjects. So, if they were given the power to transform a stone into bread to satisfy their hunger, they would use it. But Jesus is not that kind of self-serving son of God. Jesus has the power of humility and self-sacrifice. Jesus replies that we do not live by

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bread alone. He asserts that humans are not solely responsible for their own well-being, but rely on God, as we shall see in our second reading.

Then the devil claims that he can give Jesus authority and fame over the kingdoms of the inhabited world, which is the Roman Empire, if Jesus worships him. But Jesus, replies that God is the only one to be worshipped. Fame and authority are of no interest to Jesus, because he answers to a higher power. And finally, the devil, quotes the psalms to urge Jesus to throw himself down from the top of the temple, to prove that he is the Son of God, for if he is, surely God will send his angels to save him. The devil attempts to get Jesus to put God to the test. Jesus' answer tells us that Scripture should not be used to cast doubt on God's presence with God's people. They should not be recited to serve selfish interests. Instead, the Scriptures are reminders of God's powerful presence with God's people even in the wilderness, where God provided for their every need with water from rocks, manna from heaven, and pillars of fire to see at night. The Holy Spirit leads God's people to resist the temptations of the devil and of the occupying Roman empire.

How many times do we try to merge Jesus' temptations in the desert with our Lenten disciplines of giving up chocolate or alcohol? For Luke, the temptations of Jesus are not equivalent to individual, personal acts related to faith, but to Jesus' unique vocation as the Spirit-anointed Son of God. Jesus' vocation is grounded in his baptism story when the Holy Spirit descends and his ministry is described as the Spirit's anointing work of good news for the poor when he gives his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth in Luke chapter 4. Luke's temptation is about how Jesus will fulfil his Spirit-anointed vocation as Son of God. Jesus went into the wilderness full of the Spirit, he was led there by the Spirit and he leaves and returns to Galilee full of the Spirit. But Jesus is vulnerable. He has eaten nothing and is famished. It is when we are most vulnerable, worn down by life's troubles, that we are most susceptible to temptations – to the temptation to lash out at others for our own failings, to react in anger, sometimes at the slightest provocation, to hurt others to lessen our own hurt. And change brings vulnerability and hurt. Especially change that is forced upon us, that we feel we have no control over, like a worldwide pandemic, or a foreign leader invading a sovereign country, or a building that needs repairs.

About two or three weeks ago, I read a devotional from the United Church of Christ, based on verses from our second reading, which struck me as appropriate as we continue to discuss our mission for the future and our plans for the building, and I will open our Church Meeting with part of that reflection, but this whole idea of trusting in God and not worrying seems very appropriate for our times – trust in God that there will be a peaceful resolution

to the situation in Ukraine; trust in God that we will continue to learn to live with Covid and be able to reduce the restrictions we have been living with and that we won't be hit by a new variant; trust in God that God knows what is needed here in this place, in Christ Church, Rayleigh. We need to listen to that small, quiet voice of God, and discern how we can grow and spread God's word and God's love out into the wider community. I haven't prepared another card for us to take home today, but for those of you who were here two weeks ago, we could take the same motto again for today and for the weeks to come – Trust in the Lord.

Jesus says do not worry about what you will eat or what you will wear – do not keep worrying, your Father knows what you need and will provide; instead strive for God's kingdom and everything else you need will be given to you. The reflection I will use at the start of Church Meeting, talks about a church wanting to know how to survive. We are not at that point of simply trying to survive, but if we don't start reaching out now, and becoming more attractive to people in Rayleigh; if we don't start having more week-day activities that meet people's needs, and don't make our building look more welcoming, open and friendly, rather than a members-only club stuck in the past, it won't be too long before we will be discussing survival. Jesus says, stop worrying, don't sweat the small stuff as they say, focus on God's kingdom. Let us ask God to show us God's purpose. Ask what God is calling us to do here. What is God's mission for this place? Call on God to show us that and give us what we need to be able to do it, and leave the others things to sort themselves out. In the months to come there will undoubtedly be heated discussions about paint colour, and carpets and stackable chairs, because we are human and we'd rather deal with those things that we think we can manage, than look at the big picture which may feel like too much for us to take on. But that is not God's way. Seek first the kingdom of God, and these things will be given to you as well.

Now, the most obvious hymn to follow would be Seek ye First, but we sang that a couple of weeks ago, so we will sing a hymn appropriate for the start of Lent:

Hymn There is a green hill far away R&S 223

Cecil Frances Alexander

There is a green hill far away,
Without a city wall,
Where the dear Lord was crucified,
Who died to save us all.

He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
That we might go at last to heaven,
Saved by his precious blood.

We may not know, we cannot tell,
What pains he had to bear,
But we believe it was for us
He hung and suffered there.

Oh, dearly, dearly has he loved!
And we must love him too,
And trust in his redeeming blood,
And try his works to do.

Prayers of confession and intercession

Forgive us – for closing ourselves to the driving of your Holy Spirit,
for choosing to live in the places of comfort rather than being led into the wilderness;
for letting fear of the person who is different rule our lives
rather than letting your love for all people fill our hearts;
for our separation from one another in the Body of Christ;
for not trusting that you hold the future in your hands.

The URC Prayer Handbook, p19

God of peace and justice,
we pray for the people of Ukraine.
We pray for peace and the laying down of weapons.
We pray for all those who fear for tomorrow,
that your Spirit of comfort would draw near to them.
We pray for those with power over war or peace,
for wisdom, discernment and compassion to guide their decisions.
Above all, we pray for all your precious children, at risk and in fear,
that you would hold and protect them.
This we pray in the name of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn We sing the praise of him who died R&S 229

We sing the praise of Him who died,
of Him who died upon the Cross;
the sinner's hope let all deride,
for this we count the world but loss.

Inscribed upon the Cross we see
in shining letters, God is love!
he bears our sins upon the tree,
he brings us mercy from above.

The Cross: it takes our guilt away;
it holds the fainting spirit up;
it cheers with hope the gloomy day,
and sweetens every bitter cup.

It makes the coward spirit brave,
and nerves the feeble arm for fight;
it takes the terror from the grave,
and gilds the bed of death with light;

the balm of life, the cure of woe,
the measure and the pledge of love,
the sinner's refuge here below,
the angels' theme in heaven above.

Thomas Kelly

Blessing

This is the time of ashes and dust
when darkness clothes our dreams
and no star shines a guiding light.
Be the wings of our strength, O God
in this time of wilderness waiting.
May the example of Jesus' temptation give us hope,
And the guidance of the Holy Spirit grant us peace. Amen.