

Call to Worship

Turn away from the calls of worldly success
Repent and turn back to God.
Turn away from the desire to have what everyone else has
Repent and turn back to God.
Turn away from greed and the race for power
Repent and turn back to God.
As we enter Lent, may we turn back to God
May we seek forgiveness,
may we seek healing,
may we seek wholeness.
May our hearts be renewed in this time of worship.

Hymn Great God, your love has called us here R&S 339

Great God, your love has called us here
as we, by love, for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind
your call to hear, your love to find.

We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems close confined,
yet seeking hope for humankind.

Great God, in Christ you call our name
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right or claim,

but by your gracious love alone.
We strain to glimpse your mercy seat
and find you kneeling at our feet.

Then take the towel, and break the bread,
and humble us, and call us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings,
to fill all worlds, to crown all things.

Great God, in Christ you set us free
your life to live, your joy to share.
Give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do
while love is making all things new.

Brian Wren

Introduction/Children's Time - Rainbows

Offering

We have the means to give, we have the reason to give,
and there are many waiting for us to give.
Yet often, our hands hold back, and we hoard what we have for ourselves.
God of grace, God of the wilderness,
this Lent help us to think of others, to make changes that benefit others
and to offer ourselves to you.
Accept these gifts, and the coins for WaterAid, that they may make a real difference
in people's lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Hymn A rainbow in the sky (Tune at R&S 294)

A rainbow in the sky,
its colours arching high,
brings promise of our great Creator's caring;
tells that sustaining care,
will ceaselessly be there,
to keep our planet fruitful and life-bearing.

2. When summer droughts descend,
threat'ning to know no end,
our faith remains that somehow rains will follow.
Each time new crops are sown,

We trust that we'll be shown,
God's promise of a harvest is not hollow.

3. Yet rainbows in the sky,
their colours arching high,
are also for us all a call to caring.
Our fragile planet needs
urgent, effective deeds,
lest we'd destroy and leave our God despairing.

4. Now we must show we care,
working on world-repair,
united, to avoid self-wrought disaster;
tirelessly shift by shift,
strive to restore God's gift,
and for our children's sakes start working faster

5. Each rainbow in the sky,
its colours arching high,
invites us all to celebrate God's sharing,
but also recommit,
actively do our bit,
in grateful, vital, planetary caring.

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Children leave for Sunday Club

Opening Prayer

URC Prayer Handbook p17

Prayer of Confession

The presence of God surrounds us, and yet too often we go about our daily lives oblivious to the power of the Holy Spirit moving in our midst. Let us together confess the ways in which we are blind to God's ever-present care and love.

God of rainbows and puddles,
Lover of snow showers and clear blue skies,
we confess to you and to one another
the many ways we fail to live the lives you want for us.
We make ourselves busy with many things,
and neglect to listen to your voice.
All too often we see the worst in the world around us,
and look past your signs of hope.
We are quick to voice our dissent with one another,
and refuse to see your face in the persons with whom we disagree.
We focus on our own hurts, anger, and disappointments,
and close our hearts to your transforming grace.
O Holy Light of the world, forgive us.
Open our eyes to your endless possibilities.
Give us courage to listen for your call to us.
Take our hearts of stone, and make them new again with your holy love. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (2 Peter 1:19)

Do not be afraid. God's light has come into the world and has scattered the darkness; the morning star rises in our hearts. Rejoice! For God does not hold our mistakes against us, but embraces us as God's own beloved. Amen

Hymn Again we keep this solemn fast Tune *Old Hundreth* (R&S 21)

Again we keep this solemn fast, a gift of faith from ages past,
These forty days that, year-by-year, bid contrite hearts to Christ draw near.

The law and prophets from of old in figured ways this Lent foretold,
Which Christ, all ages' Lord and Guide, in these last days has sanctified.

More sparing, therefore, let us make the words we speak, the food we take,
Our sleep, our laughter, ev'ry sense; learn peace through holy penitence.

Let us avoid each harmful way that lures the careless mind astray;
By watchful prayer our spirits free from scheming of the Enemy.

We pray, O blessed Three in One, Our God while endless ages run,
That this, our Lent of forty days, may bring us growth and give you praise.

Readings: Genesis 9:8-17
Mark 1:9-15

Today is the first Sunday in Lent when we traditionally read the account of Jesus being tempted in the desert or wilderness. John's gospel does not mention this at all. Matthew and Luke have quite similar accounts of the devil tempting Jesus three times, telling him to change stones into bread, to throw himself off the temple so angels could save him, and saying he would give Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if Jesus worshipped the devil. Jesus, of course refused all these temptations. In Mark's gospel we simply get, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." While in the places Jesus lived, the wilderness would have been a desert, other places can be considered a wilderness – a wood, forest or jungle, an empty beach in winter, a windswept cliff, or really anywhere outside our comfort zone. We note that it was the Spirit that sent Jesus into the wilderness, which perhaps implies that he didn't go entirely of his own free will. And we also note that the Greek word for tempted, can also mean tested, so it wasn't necessarily that Jesus had to resist specific temptations, like we sometimes think of resisting temptation in Lent by giving up luxuries, maybe alcohol or chocolate, sweets and biscuits, though as I mentioned in my letter for the March Church News, giving things up seems to have gone somewhat out of fashion, and now some people at least, take something on in the form of daily reflections or meditations. The WaterAid website (we're supporting WaterAid with our coin Lent collection), suggests trying to change behaviour to save the planet, by avoiding buying foods with excess packaging, taking a re-usable bag or water bottle, buying second-hand clothes rather than new, and so on.

There seem to be quite a lot of programmes about the wilderness around. In particular at the moment is Ben Fogle, *New Lives in the Wild*, where he goes around the world visiting people who have given up the rat race, quite often due to mental health issues or financial problems. While they all face challenges, on the whole, going to live in the wilderness, alone, or with a partner, is usually seen to be a good thing. The people doing it may be tested in terms of getting used to being alone, or not having electricity or other amenities we are used to, but they all view it as a change for the better. Maybe there is something in that, that we can get by with less stuff, less luxuries, less or no social media and the entertainments of TV and radio that we take for granted. I think I could quite happily live without a mobile phone or social media, but I'm not sure I could live without books.

Mark's version of the story seems to be more about Jesus being tested, and it being a spiritual encounter. All we are told is that Jesus was in the wilderness with wild animals and

was tempted by Satan. In the Bible, going into the wilderness usually means a spiritual encounter. Apart from these 40 days at the start of his ministry, Jesus often went into the wilderness to be alone and pray. And other Biblical characters such as Moses also had spiritual encounters in the desert. Perhaps we too might encounter God, if we went away more into nature, away from all the demands of modern life.

The first Sunday in Lent always focuses on the temptation of Jesus, and in the other lectionary years with Matthew or Luke there's a lot more to work with. Both those narratives provide the dialogue with Satan and the three specific ways Jesus is tempted. Mark's wilderness experience is rather meagre by comparison. It essentially comprises only two verses. In fact, the whole reading for today is only six verses long and yet it reveals the urgency of Mark's writing, and the way Mark situates the temptation in relation to Jesus' baptism and ministry.

Once again, the urgency of the text comes through Mark's favourite word: "immediately". In verse 10, Mark uses it when Jesus comes up out of the water (the church Bible has it as "just"). Mark wants to drive home the point: this event of the gospel in Jesus is a world-shattering, urgent one. Mark then uses the word again in verse 12, as the Spirit "immediately" drove Jesus out into the wilderness.

This word "immediately" describes the Spirit's work in driving Jesus into the desert to be tempted. Mark puts it in a wild way: the Spirit "casts out" Jesus into the wilderness, in the same way Jesus casts out evil spirits.

Jesus's temptation is not some theological conversation with the devil as in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, but a forty-day, life-or-death, Spirit-authorized struggle in a place of vulnerability. Wild animals show up. Angels wait upon him. The temptation in Mark is not words, but an actual, real-life struggle that Jesus survives. Out of that test and struggle instigated by the Spirit, Jesus finally comes forth to preach in Galilee. Having come through his Spirit-driven test by Satan, Jesus points not to himself but announces God's ultimate purposes: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news". Let the healings, the liberation from bondage to evil, the announcement of forgiveness, and the calls to transformation begin.

This version of the temptation of Jesus in Mark's gospel disrupts our meagre Lenten practice. This temptation story is not just leading us from a chocolate to a temporary non-chocolate existence for six weeks. It calls us, rather, to envision a kind of holy disruption grounded in the longing for God to set things right. As a post-Covid church, it may be tempting to minimize transformation, at least until we learn to manage hybrid worship, livestreaming, and getting the numbers in the pews back up again. When the world is so

chaotic with wars and climate change, we like the comfort blanket of the church we've always known, the kind of worship we've always known, we don't want change and we don't want to be disrupted from our jolly pancake days by anything as spiritual as an Ash Wednesday service, or a Bible study for a mere six weeks. But Mark's Jesus won't have it. He comes with the gospel of God, points away from himself, trusting that the longing for God to break through the heavens means both change for us and change with us and by us.

Maybe this Lent we need to be driven out by the Spirit into the wilderness – not 40 days of the desert, not 40 days of fasting or even giving up chocolate, but 40 days of true inner reflection and reflection on what we want our church to be and do, not just for us and our comfort, but for the generations to come. SILENCE

Hymn Jesus the Lord says R&S 199

Jesus the Lord says, I am the bread,
The bread of life for the world am I.
The bread of life for the world am I.
The bread of life for the world am I.
Jesus the Lord says, I am the bread,
The bread of life for the world am I.

Jesus the Lord says, I am the vine,
the true and fruitful vine am I...

Jesus the Lord says, I am the way,
the true and living way am I...

Jesus the Lord says, I am the light,
the one true light of the world am I...

Jesus the Lord says, I am the life,
the resurrection and the life am I...

Anon tr. from Urdu

Lord's Supper

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations, and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us, to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

**Holy, holy, holy Lord
God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

This is the mystery of faith:

**Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ will come again.**

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine, and upon your people, that Christ may be with us, and we may be ready to live for you and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us. You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service. Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of Intercession

Most Holy God, your goodness always tests our readiness to receive it, please increase our eagerness for you and enlarge our ability to share your love around.

Gracious God, steer us through times of temptation,
And deliver us from evil.

On this Sunday in Lent we think of those who are being acutely tempted: tempted to look the other way when wrong is happening in their workplace; tempted to misuse their gifts for a unfit purposes; tempted to allow untamed emotions to hold sway; tempted by the corrupting power of money; and those tempted to stay in a rut rather than strike out on new paths for Christ Jesus.

Generous God, steer us through times of temptation,
And deliver us from evil.

We pray also for the many who feel pushed and tested almost beyond their endurance; those in positions of heavy responsibility who feel overloaded to the point of collapse; or those pressured from all sides by factions in workplace or community; suffering people—and all who must watch a loved one suffer— who feel they can bear no more; kindly folk whose patience with a difficult friend is now at breaking point; persecuted Christians whose faith seems stretched beyond their limit;

and the depressed whose inner being endures a misery which no human word can alleviate.
Merciful God, steer us through times of temptation,
And deliver us from evil.

We also pray for those who seem to be in a position of advantage:
the happy, that their happiness may always be used for goodwill and compassion;
the strong, that their energies may be used wisely and gently;
the clever, that they may employ their mental facility for good not evil;
for the rich, that their wealth may be shared for the uplifting of the poor;
for the powerful, that they may use their position as a blessing to humanity;
and those of strong faith, that they may walk humbly and affirm the weaker souls.
Righteous God, steer us through times of temptation,
And deliver us from evil.

And now most Holy God, we pray for each other in this church. None of us know the extent of the pressures that some may be under this very day. In the silence we bring before you all those we know to be sick or need your healing grace, and areas of conflict and violence around the world.
SILENCE

Look upon us all, read our thoughts and weigh our feelings, and by your utter resourcefulness, "save us in the time of trial and deliver us from all evil." Through Christ Jesus our Saviour. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Praise to the holiest R&S 103 (1st Tune) omit vs 5&6

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 loving wisdom of our God,
When all was sin and shame,

He, the last Adam, to the fight
And to the rescue came.

And that a higher gift than grace
Should flesh and blood refine,
God's presence, and His very self
And essence all-divine.

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

J. H. Newman

Blessing

Whatever wilderness the Spirit has brought you to:
walk in boldness, as a beloved child of God
walk in peace, under the shelter of the Most High
walk in faith, knowing Christ walks with you. Amen.