

**Call to Worship** (1 Corinthians 1:18-25, Psalm 19)

How does God speak? Not with a voice like mere mortals, yet God speaks in many ways:

In the bountiful creation around us:

"The midnight skies tell of God's glory, the midday sun displays holy handiwork.

Each new day speaks God's language, and night after night knows more than it can tell."

Yet it is the cross of Jesus where God speaks most profoundly:

"The talk of the cross sounds absurd to those who think they are sophisticated,  
but for us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

Let the way we speak and the way we think be acceptable in your sight

O God our strength and our redeemer. Let us worship the Creator of heaven and earth!

**Hymn** Sing for God's glory (Tune *Lobe den Herren* R&S 74)

Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation,

racing across the sky, trailing bright clouds of elation;

sun of delight succeeds the velvet of night,

warming the earth's exultation.

Sing for God's power that shatters the chains that would bind us,

searing the bleakness of fear and despair that would blind us,

touching our shame with love that will not lay blame,

reaching out gently to find us.

Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,

tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion;

lifeblood of right, resisting evil and slight,

offering freedom's transfusion.

Sing for God's saints who have travelled faith's journey before us,

who in our weariness give us their hope to restore us;

in them we see the new creation to be,

Spirit of love made flesh for us.

Kathryn Galloway

**Gifts**

Jesus...You are God's Son shining in the heavens, we smile in your light.

Jesus...You are God's Law restoring souls, we study and obey you.

Jesus...You are more precious than gold, we give up all for you.

Holy One, accept these gifts, and our lives, for your service,

that Your will may be done and Your kingdom come. Amen

**Hymn** O for a closer walk with God R&S 551 (Tune *Stracathro*, R&S 101)

O for a closer walk with God,

A calm and heavenly frame,

A light to shine upon the road

That leads me to the Lamb!

Return, O holy Dove, return,

Sweet messenger of rest;

I hate the sins that made Thee mourn

And drove Thee from my breast.

Where is the blessedness I knew,

When first I saw the Lord?

Where is the soul refreshing view

Of Jesus, and His Word?

The dearest idol I have known,

Whate'er that idol be

Help me to tear it from Thy throne,

And worship only Thee.

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!

How sweet their memory still!

But they have left an aching void

The world can never fill.

So shall my walk be close with God,

Calm and serene my frame;

So purer light shall mark the road

That leads me to the Lamb

William Cowper

### Opening Prayer

Who is this who enters the doors of our temple, who overturns the tables,  
strews silver and gold on the floor and frees the sacrificial doves from gilded cages?  
Listen, as they rise, the beating of their wings is a song of loud hosanna.  
It is Jesus of Galilee, the Son of God, who comes to cleanse the great temple,  
to restore its subverted chambers to a house of hallowed prayer.  
Then let us open the doors of our hearts even wider,  
so he can cast out the thieves who would take what is sacred and tender  
and turn it hard as gold in a fist.  
May the temple within us be a refuge where doves of peace roost in the rafters.  
May it be a garden that bears the fruits of a generous spirit.  
Holy God, take what is corrupt and withered and let it break forth in beauty.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

### URC Prayer Handbook p19

#### Hymn The temple in Jerusalem (Tune *Abingdon* R&S 339)

The temple in Jerusalem,  
the pivot point where heav'n met earth,  
you built to be your home with us,  
but human greed undid its worth.

*Come cleanse, restore, revive, renew,  
make room for praise and pray'r to you!*

Indignant Jesus formed a whip  
to chase ungodliness away,  
'til greed took flight and beasts were gone  
and people found the space to pray.

Yet, still, this temple failed to form  
your home with us, your dwelling place,  
but cleansing Jesus' death and life  
in three days brought us face to face.

Today, your Church is human still,  
with sin and selfishness shot through.  
If justice must be lived each day,  
once more, come cleanse, your Church  
renew.

And each, alone, imperfect stands,  
a shoddy home for you today.  
We need your cleansing Spirit's care  
'til we are temples where you'll stay

John Campbell © Kevin Mayhew Ltd

#### Bible readings: **Exodus 20:1-17** **John 2:13-22**

Although on the surface quite different, I think today's two readings today are linked. The first gives us the Ten Commandments and focuses on three main things – getting enough rest, in particular taking the sabbath rest, just as God rested on the seventh day; on not making and worshipping idols; and to not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour. At a recent C4R meeting, we were talking about debt and if there was the need for a CAP debt management service here in Rayleigh. Someone said there's a different kind of debt in parts of Rayleigh, not that people are living on benefits, or have hit rock-bottom and have run up debt just to pay the bills, but credit card debt due to keeping up with the Jones. The idea prevalent in much of southern Essex, that your house is your castle, and it should look better than your neighbours, and so should your car, which you must wash religiously once a week. I can see this obviously displayed by some of my neighbours. And then we have the reading from John about Jesus violently clearing out the Temple, which on the service at least, may be about clearing out corruption and a form of idolatry.

Exodus 20 places importance on rest, which may cause us to consider our current relationship to rest's opposite, work, and whether it is a good or healthy one. Articles on overworking, stress, mental health and how to be more mindful would imply that the relationship is not good. And before those of you who are retired think this doesn't relate to you, think about how much volunteering you do, or taking care of grandchildren or sick friends or relatives, and how much free time and rest you really have. We might also think about the ways in which our identity or self-worth is centred on our work or employment, and what that means when we give up paid employment.

Considering rest also raises questions about our relationship to technology and social media. Can we ever truly rest if we are "connected" or reachable at all times? There may be good reasons, but how many of you now have your mobile phones switched on? The problems caused by technology, especially social media, intersect with several other laws mentioned in Exodus 20 such as the prohibition against idolatry and covetousness - wanting what your neighbour has, looking eagerly at the adverts for the latest smart phone or device, or automatically getting a new car every three years. There has been quite a bit in the news lately about proposals to ban smart phones for under 16s, because of the dangers to mental and physical health. But what about the rest of us? Lent is a good time to reflect on these things. Averages in the UK vary (looking online!!) but it seems that the average amount of time spent online is around 6 hours a day. If you think people spend 8 hours a day working and 8 hours sleeping, that would only leave two hours for eating, travelling to work, exercising, talking to your family and so on. However you look at it, a lot of people spend a huge amount of time online and on social media.

The definition of idolatry, when applied to our modern context, can be expanded to anything that rivals God for our attention like fame, power, or money, or something that we treat as more important than, or as important as God – given how much time some of us spend online, it's a good candidate for idolatry. An idolatry that negatively impacts our relationships with others. Technology, especially social media, not only steals our attention but also amplifies our envy and therefore our covetousness, a misdeed explicitly warned against in Exodus 20:17. Social media increases envy because it shows you the lives of people more fortunate than you; and it puts you in the same virtual community as people who are not in your real-life community, making you compare yourself with them. People tend not to post about the hard things happening in their lives, but only post holiday pictures, meals out and sporting achievements – their own, or their off-spring's. It is the modern-day equivalent of the Christmas bragging letter some people used to send, informing friends and family of how great their life is.

The purpose of these laws was to support and create the right relationships among people, their community, and their God. It should therefore be unsurprising that the contravention of these laws leads to dissatisfaction and dysfunctionality. The jealousy and covetousness created by social media leads to misery, depression, and unhappiness. So, despite their antiquity and perhaps lack of popularity, the Ten Commandments insofar as they tell us how to live better lives and have better relationships, are still relevant and important today. And so, we come to Jesus upsetting things in the Temple. This is a well-known story, and perhaps we think we know what it is all about. It appears in all four of the gospels, though of course John's account is different.

You needed cattle and sheep and doves and money changers to run a Jewish temple. The temple at that time was about people making animal sacrifices to make their petition to God. And, different animals had different prices, so there was an element of showing how well-off you were too – you might think of it as an ancient version of showing off on social media! Jesus makes it impossible for people to buy animals for the required sacrifices, and impossible for those who have come from all over the Empire to change their money and pay their tithes. Jesus is stopping the whole enterprise from running.

Why, we might ask? If you've grown up in the church, you probably learned somewhere along the line that the problem was corruption: people were not just selling animals, they were cheating other people as they did it. The other three gospels give us clues to come to that conclusion. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus borrows from the prophet Jeremiah to accuse those who are selling things of making the temple into a "den of robbers." Maybe Jesus does raise a ruckus in the temple to protest corruption and to clean it up, if only for an afternoon. But in the gospel of John, this conflict in the temple takes on a different meaning. Jesus is not only acting against corruption, he is involved in performance art. Jesus brings temple activity to a total standstill in order to point to another holy place altogether. "Destroy this temple," Jesus says, "and in three days, I will raise it up."

Like a lot of what Jesus says in John, this line from Jesus does not follow from what precedes it. You hear it, and you think, What? Who said anything about destroying the temple? Even the people listening to Jesus at the time are confused. They point out that the temple has been under construction for decades. Really, Jesus, how are you going to rebuild it in three days? The narrator tries to help us all out. "He was speaking of the temple of his body," John writes. OK, if you are a trusting reader of scripture, you are waiting for this to make sense. If you are a suspicious one, you may have already given up.

The temple was the meeting place between God and God's people. Sacrifices were offered during religious festivals and at special times in people's lives, such as the birth of a child or

in thanksgiving for a harvest. The temple was a holy place. It was a place where human life and divine blessing met. In John's Gospel, the body of Jesus is the new holy place. "The Word became flesh, and lived among us," John writes. In the incarnation, with the birth of Jesus, God's dwelling place is with human beings, as a human being.

For Christians today, scripture about the relative virtues of temple-based worship is pretty far from our experience. But we do care about where precisely our lives might intersect with the divine. First century Jews are not the only ones to spend time thinking about where the divine and human meet. Where does God meet you? Is the meeting place a church sanctuary filled with light? Or maybe it is a cathedral that looks completely dark until your eyes adjust to the dimness. Do you see God in a candle flame? Do you know the transcendent through a piece of music? Maybe you recognise God in the bread and wine of the Sacraments? Maybe your holy place is a walk in nature or listening to bird song. Maybe it is silence.

The surprise in today's gospel reading is that Jesus says that the divine is present in his body. The gospel of John makes this claim, that a human body - unique but also a lot like your body or mine - is the holy place of God. Jesus was not just wearing a human body like a set of clothes. He *was* a human body, as inseparable from his body as you are from yours. And God was inseparable from him.

During the season of Lent, we follow the body of Jesus as he travels to Jerusalem, as his hands braid pieces of rope into a whip to herd cattle and sheep out of the temple, as his knees bend to wash the feet of the disciples. We watch him eat and drink with his friends, and we follow him to the garden, where his disciples unsuccessfully fight off sleep and Jesus sweats through a prayer that he might not have to endure the torture that is in his immediate future. We see him beaten, crucified, taken down from the cross, and laid in a tomb. And in the stories of his resurrection, he is still a body - huggable, touchable, scarred, and eating.

In all these events, the body of Jesus is the location of God, and the point of connection between divine and human life. From John's perspective, little of this was clear, even to the disciples, at the start of Jesus' ministry. The disciples needed time and more experience with Jesus to understand. The passage is looking back at a remembered event – after he was raised, his disciples remembered what he had said about the temple. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it was not clear that Jesus was both the eternal Word and human flesh — it was not clear but it was true, which may explain why John places this story at the start of his gospel, rather than near the end, as the other gospels do. The Word is made flesh in chapter 1, in chapter 2 it is already the holy dwelling place of God. So, this Lent, let us

perhaps ponder our relationship with our own body, our relationship with others and our relationship to rest and work and wanting, or not wanting what others have. Do not make idols; remember the sabbath day and keep it holy, and do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour, be they living next door, or the neighbour you follow on Facebook.

**Hymn** Jesus Christ is waiting (Tune *Noel Nouvelet* R&S 243)

Jesus Christ is waiting,  
Waiting in the streets;  
No one is his neighbour,  
All alone he eats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am lonely too.  
Make me, friend or stranger,  
Fit to wait on you

Jesus Christ is raging,  
Raging in the streets,  
Where injustice spirals  
And real hope retreats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am angry too.  
In the Kingdom's causes  
Let me rage with you.

Jesus Christ is healing,  
Healing in the streets;  
Curing those who suffer,  
Touching those he greets.

Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I have pity too.  
Let my care be active,  
Healing just like you.

Jesus Christ is dancing,  
Dancing in the streets,  
Where each sign of hatred  
He, with love, defeats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I should triumph too.  
On suspicion's graveyard  
Let me dance with you.

Jesus Christ is calling,  
Calling in the streets,  
"Who will join my journey?  
I will guide their feet."  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
Let my fears be few.  
Walk one step before me;  
I will follow you.

John L. Bell and Graham Maule

**Prayers of intercession**

In the days of Noah, God placed a rainbow in the sky as the sign of a covenant of God's love for all the earth. In the colours of the rainbow, we see the sign of God's grace for all creation.

In the days of Moses, the words of God were written on tablets of stone, as the sign of a covenant between God and all of God's people. In the tablets of stone, we see the sign of God's hope for each to live in peace with God and neighbour.

In the days of the prophets, God promised to place a new covenant in our hearts.

As members of the living Body of Christ, we see the sign of God's promise among us.

In the body of Christ, given for us we see the love of God among us. Let us pray to the Holy One for the needs of the world:

We pray for the world around us,  
for the many who continue to suffer and call out for help:  
for those without enough to eat;  
for those caught up in violence and political uprisings;  
for those picking up the pieces after a natural disaster;  
for those desperate to find work to support their families.

We also pray for family and friends who are suffering:  
those struggling physically or emotionally,  
those working to overcome mental illness;  
those facing challenges at home or at work;  
those grieving the death of a loved one.

We pray for Your church around the world,  
that it would be a living demonstration of Your coming kingdom:  
    offering hospitality to all,  
    ready to help in times of need,  
    showing love to friends and enemies alike,  
    seeking to live in peace with all.

We pray for those who covet what others have,  
who are jealous of others apparent wealth and wellbeing.  
We pray for those living with addiction  
and those struggling to give up bad habits; for those who are in debt for whatever reason.  
In this season of Lent we pray that we might all move closer to you, O God  
And share your love with those around us.

Truth be told, Jesus, there are lots of tables that need overturning in our lives;  
Beneath the veneer of respectability we know the pain of keeping up the facade;  
What a relief it would be to have it all upset, smashed, destroyed  
So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could come and help us to radically rearrange  
the furniture of our lives.

Lord Jesus, it was your will that your Father's House would be a place of prayer for all people;  
grant us the strength and wisdom to be a people consumed with prayer and zeal for you,  
this day and always. **Amen.**

**Lord's Prayer**

**Hymn** The King of love my Shepherd is R&S 552

The King of love my Shepherd is,  
Whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
And he is mine for ever.

In death's dark vale I fear no ill  
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;  
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,  
Thy cross before to guide me.

Where streams of living water flow  
My ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow  
With food celestial feedeth.

Thou spread'st a table in my sight;  
Thy unction, grace bestoweth:  
And O what transport of delight  
From thy pure chalice floweth!

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love he sought me,  
And on his shoulder gently laid,  
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

And so through all the length of days  
Thy goodness faileth never;  
Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise  
Within thy house for ever.

H.W. Baker

**Blessing**

Go now, with God's foolishness and weakness as your only wisdom and strength.  
Proclaim Christ crucified and seek riches only in the love of God's Word  
and in zeal for God's house.  
May God's just demands be your nourishment & delight.  
May Christ be the power and wisdom of God to you.  
May the Holy Spirit keep you, thought and word, in God's good grace.

And may the blessing of God, Creator, Son and Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore. Amen