

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2021**  
**First Sunday of Lent**

**Collect**

Heavenly Father,  
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,  
and grew closer to you in the desert:  
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer  
that we may witness to your saving love  
in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

**Genesis 9:8-17**

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

**Mark 1:9-15**

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

## Sermon

I wonder how you usually approach Lent. Is it a season that you look forward to, or really rather dread? Have you found that there are certain practices and devotions that you find helpful, and repeat each Lent? Or do you approach each year afresh, trying different things to see what might help?

And, just as significantly, do you have a sense of what Lent is about for you? Is it, for example, a time of penitence, of coming before God and confessing wrongdoing? Or perhaps it's a time of preparation, recognising that the celebration of Easter is less meaningful without observing a Holy Lent beforehand? Maybe it is drawing closer to God that is particularly important for you during Lent – which may be penitential, yet can just as appropriately include resting in the presence of the one who loves you.

There is always a danger in opening a sermon with so many questions – it may be that your head is already spinning with a range of ideas, and everything else I say will be lost forever. But I'm going to continue – because what I hope is that as we explore this morning's gospel reading, as well as thinking about the year that has just passed, we might discover ways in which this year's Lent can be genuinely meaningful.

However it is that you usually approach Lent, none of us can escape the fact that this year has been very different. Over the last twelve months, we have experienced three periods of lockdown – around six months in total. And even during those times that we were not in lockdown, our activities were seriously restricted. Only you will know what impact this has had on you. And indeed only you can know whether you have felt significantly different about each period of lockdown. Undoubtedly the weather has been very different over these past weeks than during April and May last year. And perhaps our expectations have changed, too.

One thing is certain. We each of us go into Lent as people who have experienced a very unusual year. To pretend otherwise would be an act of denial.

What is less clear is exactly what that means. And here there is a paradox. For some of you, a season of penitence after the year we have just endured would feel close to an act of barbarism. That is a perfectly appropriate response. After all, most of us have spent twelve months being denied the human contact that is such a precious and formational aspect of who we are. To approach this Lent in a gentler spirit may be what you need. Over the last few days, I have heard people talking about finding ways during Lent to feed their souls; to lift their spirit; whether that be by listening to your favourite music, reading some devotional material, spending time enjoying the beauty of nature, or even giving yourself permission to watch your favourite television programme.

It is also true, though, that the fixed nature of the church year can be something that grounds and sustains us. After a year that has been anything but normal, it may be that you need to turn to your familiar Lenten observations as a kind of homecoming. As a reminder that throughout the twists and turns of life, one thing does remain firm, and that is the presence of God, loving and nurturing you no matter what you are living through. For you, the familiarity of Lenten discipline may be just what you need to connect you with the constancy of God. And that's ok, too.

One of the things I love about Mark's gospel is its brevity. It is the shortest of the gospels, a bare sixteen chapters. Mark has no time for the incidentals, moving rapidly from one event to the next. Here, in the opening chapter, in a bare seven verses, we hear of Jesus's baptism, his time in the

wilderness, and the beginning of his ministry. That's quite a whirlwind. Yet if we pause over these verses, perhaps they might enlighten us as we begin our Lenten journeys.

The baptism of Jesus is really all about his identity. It is a defining moment, identifying him as God's son, and reminding him of God's unending love. And so for each of us, Lent can be a time of self-reflection, during which we recognise our true nature, as children of God. Notice the importance of other people – and of course for us that is more difficult than usual this year. Jesus approaches John for baptism – he recognises the value of fellow travellers. More than that, though, we really only find out who we are when we live in relationship with others. Our identity is intimately linked to our relationships with one another. Have you noticed how you discover different aspects of your personality – and indeed your gifts and talents – in different company? If we are to spend time in self-reflection during Lent, it helps to have companions along the way – even if their presence must be virtual this year.

Following his baptism, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness, where he faces temptations. Above all, this is a time of formation, preparing him for the life, ministry, and ultimately the death that lies ahead of him. Jesus grows in character through his wilderness experience. He learns to trust in God, and in the challenges he faces, he shapes his own understanding. With each test, he discovers a little more about what he believes. In each response, he grows a little more confident, and therefore ready for what lies ahead. Formation is another significant Lenten theme, especially where we recognise the sense in which we are preparing ourselves – or indeed equipping ourselves – for Easter. Perhaps most of us have had enough of the desert experience this year, but we might deepen our understanding either through reading, prayer or other devotions. Just as Jesus was waited on by angels in the wilderness, so our formation is undertaken in the presence of God, loving and encouraging us.

And, after his time in the wilderness, Jesus heads out to preach the good news. To fulfil his vocation. To draw people into relationship with God, preaching the Kingdom of God. And so for us, too. Part of the purpose of Lent is to take stock. To ask ourselves whether we are following our calling, or whether we are being called elsewhere. Vocation looks different for each one of us, but there is no doubt that we have all been created by a God who loves us, and rejoices as we discover the fullness of life for which we were created. It's not always easy – sometimes the call isn't so easy to hear. And often we are drawn out of our comfort zones. Which is hardly surprising when we follow a God who teaches that those who lose their lives will find them. Yet the one who calls us is faithful – even when we find it hard to be.

So, as we enter a Lent which is both strange and familiar, perhaps we can remind ourselves that time spent in God's presence, reminding ourselves that we are God's children, preparing ourselves for what may lie ahead, and listening carefully for what we might be called to, is always worthwhile. And whether this year we feel we need gentle encouragement or clearer discipline, let's bear with ourselves and one another, and continue to hold on to the hope that is set before us in the person of Christ.

Amen