

starters for Sunday

First Sunday in Lent

5 March 2017

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Jock Stein, retired Minister formerly of Tulliallan and Kincardine, for his thoughts on the first Sunday in Lent.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

Introduction

The season of Lent covers the forty days before Easter, starting with Ash Wednesday on 1 March. Those who take it seriously recall the time Jesus spent fasting in the wilderness, and may decide to abstain from something they enjoy as a sign of that, though too often the ‘fasting’ is somewhat trivialised as in ‘giving up chocolate for Lent’. It’s worth remembering that this period was for Jesus a time of great struggle, and victory, which is no doubt why Lent leads up to the events of Holy Week and Easter Day.

[Genesis 2: 15-17, 3: 1-7](#)

At the start of the Bible there are two great creation stories, the big picture of the universe, and the more focused picture of the Garden of Eden; the latter includes the story of how Adam and Eve listened to the voice of the serpent, and were led astray.

There has been much speculation on the symbolic meaning of ‘the tree of knowledge’, usually translated as ‘knowing good and evil’, but sometimes understood as crossing key boundaries like knowing how to split the atom or clone humans. The literal meaning is anything but simple, but may indicate that when we disobey God, we discover what it is to be sinners, and innocence dies. The bigger picture here is that humans were created to live for ever looking after the earth in proper obedience, but because we disobey God we experience what it is to have a fallen nature, including a limited lifespan. This is indicated symbolically by the way early figures in the Bible have long lifespans, which reduce more to what we expect as Genesis develops.

The vignette in chapter 3 shows how temptation comes at us sideways. The snake starts with a question, to get Eve thinking about fruit, even though she gives a correct reply. Then the snake suggests that God was perhaps not as kindly as Eve had assumed, and was warning her off this fruit because it would give her power God did not want her to have. Eve saw the beauty of the



tree (true), thought about becoming wise (half-true), and ate the fruit, along with Adam. All this shows how humans fail to trust the goodness of God, and the wisdom of what God says.

The pair do get understanding, but it includes the knowledge of what it is to be exposed in shame before God and one another, symbolised by how they notice they are naked, and later hide from God.

[Psalm 32](#)

Although this psalm speaks about sin, it is not (like some psalms) a catalogue of disaster, but rather a psalm of praise. God does not leave us in our shame, but covers our sin and grants us forgiveness. Verse 2 can be taken simply as the blessing of a clear conscience, or as the richer blessing of the person who knows God's forgiveness.

This is profoundly expressed by Edwin Muir's poem, 'One Foot in Eden':

But famished field and blackened tree bear flowers in Eden never known.
 Blossoms of grief and charity bloom in these darkened fields alone.
 What had Eden ever to say of hope and faith and pity and love
 Until was buried all its day and memory found its treasure trove?
 Strange blessings never in Paradise fall from these beclouded skies.

Muir is saying that while Eden may have been a lovely place, we have something much greater because out of grief and darkness come faith and hope and love. This is expressed pithily in the Latin tag, *felix culpa*, happy blame – ie without the fall, we would not have the Christian story of salvation.

While it's common to point out, against verse 3 and 4, that suffering is often not linked with past sin, the great strength of the Old Testament approach is that because everything happens on God's watch, God is responsible for everything, and therefore God can sort out everything – so we may confidently pray to him in all circumstances. Again, if we stop thinking as Western self-focused individuals, but as people who share a common humanity with those who suffer throughout the world, we can indeed confess human sin (verse 5) and be glad in God's deliverance which is promised, which we proclaim, and for which we act as God's servant people.



[Romans 5: 12-19](#)

Deep stuff, this Sunday – but that is what Lent is about! Verse 12 is not inviting us to argue about whether we have some kind of sin gene, but rather to recognise Adam as the parent of us all, and that ‘in Adam we all die’ like him. This belief in ‘common humanity’ leads not only to radical humility but radical equality, as in the old couplet, “When Adam delved, and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?”

For Paul, Adam was a ‘type’, that is a model of who we are, and a model of the one who was to come and share our human nature, Jesus Christ. Paul then compares the effects of Adam’s ‘fall’ with the effects of Christ ‘raising us up’ (6: 4-5 – while Romans 6 will feature in the readings set for June, if you want to preach on this passage you may wish to extend the reading this Sunday).

In this passage, the work of Christ is called ‘a righteous act’ (verse 18), and described as ‘obedience’ (verse 19). This obedience is located in the death of Christ (verses 9-10), but it is worth remembering that the ‘free gift’ of Christ (verse 15) spans his life from Bethlehem to Calvary – which is why we sometimes talk about the ‘active obedience’ of his life and the ‘passive obedience’ of his death. In life and death, Jesus is the one who came ‘to do your will, O God’ (Hebrews 10: 7, quoting Psalm 40).

Paul uses the word ‘rule’ or ‘dominion’ for whatever is in charge of your life. Without Christ, you are a slave to sin and death. With Christ, you not only share in his resurrection, but start to experience this power over sin in this life (verse 17, expanded in chapter 6).

[Matthew 4: 1-11](#)

This gospel has already spoken of the Holy Spirit (1: 18, 20; 3: 11), and it is the Spirit who leads Jesus into a severe test (verse 1). We sometimes in English distinguish the ‘testing’ of God from the ‘tempting’ of the devil, but it is really the motive which is different. The forty days correspond to the forty years Israel wandered between Mt Sinai and the Promised Land, which in turn correspond to the forty days the twelve spies spent in the land of Canaan before they brought back a split report.

Matthew is interested in numbers, having already outlined three groups of 14 generations up to the birth of Christ, and the gospels all feature 12 disciples, clearly parallel to the 12 tribes of Israel.



Jesus is both the promised Messiah of Israel, and the Saviour of the world, and the three temptations seek to prevent him being either of these.

First, Jesus is tempted to magically satisfy his intense hunger, and perhaps more deeply to use his power to attract followers by providing them with material things. However the gospels consistently present Jesus as someone more than a miracle-worker, and his answer in verse 4 shows why.

Second, Jesus is tempted to prove his power by a spectacular miracle, and do it at the Temple to show himself as the one who fulfils Old Testament religion, and certainly greater than the Jewish king Herod who built that Temple. The devil even quotes scripture in support.

Third, Jesus is offered the whole world if he will only acknowledge the authority of the devil, who now shows himself in his true colours.

In each case, Jesus quotes his Bible (the Old Testament), and moreover does it in a way which shows that he understands his calling, and the motives of anyone who would divert him from that.

Sermon Ideas

The readings for Lent this year do not include an important part of the story of ‘the fall’ – how Adam blamed Eve, Eve blamed the serpent, and the consequences for human beings and the natural order. The rest of the story will only come (as an alternative reading) in 2018 – that’s the inevitable consequence of using a lectionary, it can’t cover everything important, so if you decide to preach mainly on the Genesis passages, you may want to bring in these other verses.

However the passage in Matthew is a great one for the beginning of Lent, so unless you used Luke’s version from the lectionary last year you may want to focus on that.

Several approaches can be fruitful, though it might be a long sermon if you tried to cover every one of them. For example:

- 1 Focus on how the temptations would have distorted our Lord’s ministry. All three are in effect inviting Jesus to use his power to save his own life – not only by rescuing his body



from starvation but letting him attract followers without any need to teach or heal, and especially with no need to suffer and die.

As far as we are concerned, these temptations invite the church to collude with how the world operates, whether by limiting our work to ‘approved projects’ like feeding the hungry, by limiting our work to focus on the dramatic and the miraculous, or in any way putting ‘the world, the flesh and the devil’ in place of the authority of God.

This requires discernment. The founder of the Salvation Army was accused of using the devil’s money when he accepted donations from people who had made their fortune out of gambling or worse. General Booth replied that he would ‘wash it in the blood of widows and orphans’. The point here is that our motives need to be right (verse 10).

- 2 Focus on how our Lord used his Bible, and how the devil can also cite scripture for his own evil purposes. Our calling is not to avoid citing scripture because it can be misquoted, but to know how to use it.

It’s unfortunate that ‘quoting texts’ is often dismissed with scorn, with the result that for many people the Bible has either lost authority altogether, or is relegated to being a difficult book which experts argue over. This passage invites us to follow the example of Jesus, who was able to defeat the experts of his day as well as the devil simply because (a) he knew his Bible and (b) because he knew his heavenly Father and what his mission was about.

Later this year, one of our retired ministers will publish his memoirs (Unforgotten Years by Sam Lamarti). Before his conversion to Christian faith, Sam was a young Islamic scholar who memorised the whole Qu’ran in two and a half years. Let that challenge us to get to know our Bibles at least a bit better than we do!

These three responses by Jesus are all from Deuteronomy – from 8:3, 6:16, and 6:13. Deuteronomy comprises mainly three discourses by Moses, finally put together with the other four ‘books of Moses’ during the Exile in Babylon to make what we call the Pentateuch. In Deuteronomy the journey through the desert to the Promised Land is a



model for our pilgrimage. How appropriate that Jesus found his replies to the devil all from this one book.

- 3 Take the ‘unholy trinity’ of the world, the flesh and the devil, and discuss how Jesus shows us in this passage how to negotiate life with God in the centre. This needs careful working out, avoiding the temptation to talk only about issues, and not relate them to the text.
- 4 There are three high points in this passage – the mount of temptation, usually located near Jericho; the pinnacle of Herod the Great’s temple; and the high mountain from which the devil showed Jesus all the world and its kingdoms. You could preach a sermon on high points and low points, or you could contrast these three high points with other high points like Sinai, the mount of Transfiguration, and Calvary.

Time with Children

The gospel reading lends itself to a dramatic narrative (which is easy to construct), and this would help adults as well as young people. However, it’s not an easy passage to explain to children beyond some simple points like:

- Jesus was tempted like us. So he knows what it is like to be tempted – and he can help us (Hebrews 4: 14-16).
- Jesus faced three different temptations. Here are three temptations that we face if we are trying to follow Jesus, eg
 - ✓ ‘losing it’ and doing something unchristian
 - ✓ keeping quiet when someone is getting the blame unfairly
 - ✓ if someone asks, ‘are you a christian?’ in a hostile way, saying ‘not really’ or ‘no’.

Alternatively, there are some parts of Psalm 32 that could be used as a children’s or all-age spot, with suitable stories e.g.

- The blessing of ‘owning up’ (verse 3)
- When in trouble, pray (verse 6)
- God is a great hiding place (verse 7)
- God is a good teacher (verse 8)



Corrie ten Boom's story 'The Hiding Place' can be used to illustrate all of most of these points, or (more recently) Irene Howat's many story booklets of various well-known Christians published by Christian Focus.

Prayers

Prayers of Approach

Lord God, we decided to come and worship today.

Maybe it was an easy decision, because we have a habit of coming to worship.

Maybe it was a harder decision, because of all the other pressures on our time.

Maybe it was a really unusual decision.

But you have promised to meet us, and we trust that for each one of us, there may be something special to receive today.

Yet our priority, dear God, is not to get something for ourselves,
but to worship; to declare your greatness together;
to join with millions on earth and in heaven who love you;
to join with angels and saints in saying 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.'

We come in the name of Jesus.

He is our Saviour, his life is the obedience we fail to give,
his blood makes us clean from sin,
his prayer will pick up our weak words and present them as they ought to be spoken before you.

He is our Friend, helping us in our dilemmas,
so patient with our short-comings,
so determined to make us the kind of people we were created to be.

He gives us your Spirit, to help us understand what you want,
to help us resist temptation,
to help us do what is right.

And he is the Lord, with authority over all things and all people.



Lord God, heavenly Father,
we shall have things to do tomorrow –
work to do whether paid or unpaid, stuff to learn –
at school or in other places, things to say and write and carry out.
We shall need your help during this week to come.
But now we have a special time with you,
so grant us more, much more of your Spirit,
the Spirit of Father and Son, the encourager,
the one who is love poured into our hearts.
Glory be to the Father...

Prayers of Thanks

Glory be to God for the riches of earth and sky:
for rainbows and mudslides, for rivers and spring tides,
for robins and daffodils and everything your providence provides

Glory be to God for the riches of science and technology:
for lab coats and tinfoil, for medicines and merchandise, for computers and clipboards

Glory be to God for the riches of art and craft:
for songs and symphonies, for poems and paintings, for chisels and storyboards and soldering
irons

Glory be to God for riches of human obedience:
for honest work and dedicated care, for principled defence and thoughtful teaching,
for good leadership in public and in private

Glory be to God for the riches of our homes:
for rone pipes and central heating, for raincoats and bow ties,
for recipes and laughter, and for the gifts of life and love.
Praise and honour and thanks be given to our wise and loving Creator,
through Jesus Christ our Lord, in the fullness of the Spirit, Amen.



Prayers of Confession

We confess our own faults –

things we have done wrong, things we have failed to do right, sins of thought, word and deed.

We confess the shortcomings of our church –

our faults, our fears and our failures in mission and service.

We confess the sins of our nation –

an economy which sets rich against poor and does not work for most people, politics which set left against right and leave those in the middle unsatisfied, a culture which exalts the selfie and the celebrity and loses touch with what is pure and lovely and of good report.

We confess the sufferings of our world –

the hurts of the abused, the homeless, the disabled, the neglected, the addicted, the lonely and the lost.

We confess these things and more –

and we confess the gospel of salvation which alone can forgive and heal our deepest hurts.

May God's Spirit heal us and bind up the wounds of the world, through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

All our prayers we sum up in words Christ taught us, Our Father...

Prayers of Intercession

[Some of these prayers are very specific, which has pros and cons – feel free to adjust the language where you feel it may not fit your situation]

Dear God our heavenly Father:

There are things in the world that are good –

politicians who care and look forward, business people who look after their workers,

caring folk who go the second mile time and time again –

we ask you to sustain and guide them... *(a moment of silence)*

There are things in our world we wish were different –

the wars and the wounding, the dishonesty and the disabling, the noise and the nastiness –



and we pray for those affected... (*a moment of silence*)

There are things in the church that are good –

ministers and elders who work hard and give leadership, members who care for one another, worship that uplifts and envisions –

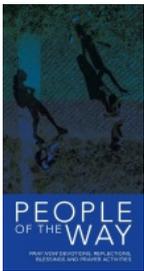
and we ask you to bless and encourage all your servants... (*a moment of silence*)

There are things in our churches we wish were different –

the infighting and the inward looking, the carelessness and the complacency, the lack of imagination – and we ask your Spirit to change things for the better... (*a moment of silence*)

And there are things in our lives, our homes, our social and business circles, for which we bring our prayers... (*a moment of silence*)

Dear God, hear us, answer us, and build us up in faith, hope and love,
for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, Amen.



In addition to the above prayers, prepared by our contributor, other prayers may be found in *People of the Way* which is the theme for this year's Pray Now. It was also the theme for Heart and Soul 2016. *People of the Way* is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Musical Suggestions

- SOGP 52** *It's me, it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer* – use either as an introit or as ‘an introduction to Lent’
- CH4 7** *How long O Lord?* – a psalm of lament and trust which suits specific seasons like Lent and Good Friday
- MP 793** *You are my hiding place* – an obvious choice when Psalm 32 is set
- Psalms for All Seasons 32A** *How blest are they whose trespass has freely been forgiven* – a good setting of part of Psalm 32 to the well-known tune ‘Rutherford’ (a new tune by John Bell seems to have been given the same name in CH4 205, which is confusing)
- CH4 545** *Lord, teach us how to pray aright* – a classic hymn for Lent, though you may have to seek an easier tune
- CH4 338** *Jesus, tempted in the desert* – this obvious hymn on the gospel passage is the only one in CH4 set to the lovely Welsh tune Ebenezer
- SOGP 106** *Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength* – a song of encouragement to accompany intercessions
- CH4 706** *For the healing of the nations* – ‘may we hallow life’s brief span’ at the end of verse 3 is a good motto for Lent
- CH3 482** *Yield not to temptation* – while the language is a little old-fashioned, no other hymn deals with temptation and trust so directly
- CH4 546** *Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire* – in verse 6, ‘the path of prayer yourself have trod’ reminds us in Lent that Jesus is our leader



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [People of the Way](#) is available from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Jock Stein for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

