

Salford Methodist Circuit



1st Sunday in Lent - 21st February 2021

Rev Clare Stainsby

Good morning everyone, good to see you, well in a manner of speaking...

I'd like to begin this service this morning with some words from Psalm 25 to begin our service:

*Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.*

The months and the seasons are constantly wheeling around, and here we are back in Lent - today is the first Sunday in Lent. Isn't it strange how sometimes the days seem to go slowly during lockdown, and yet how quickly the months seem to pass. It's nearly a year since we last fully experienced normality. And it could still some time yet before we get back there, though we remain optimistic that things are moving much closer to that time for which we all hope and wait.

The Psalmist knew that God was the source of hope and truth, meaning and purpose, guidance and security. And his words are recorded for us to be reminded that God is still those things for us: the source of hope and truth, meaning and purpose, guidance and security.

Psalm 25 is sometimes entitled: Seeking God in hard times.

Today we think about Jesus as he is about to embark on his years of ministry and mission, choosing to spending time in a barren landscape, seeking God, and looking for guidance on the way ahead.

So I'm just going to read that couple of verses one more time then we'll sing our first hymn, Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah.

*Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.*

Hymn: Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah

*Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, Bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore;
Feed me now and evermore.*

*Open thou the crystal fountain whence the healing stream shall flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, be thou still my strength and shield;*

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Be thou still my strength and shield.

*When I tread the verge of Jordan bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises, I will ever give to thee;
I will ever give to thee.*

Prayers

Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

Loving God, we believe that you are here with us, where ever we are right now.
Sometimes we see this current situation as a barren place,
a wilderness from which we long to escape, back to the place of familiarity and normality.

But you call us to be patient, and to trust, to listen for your voice of love.
And to sense the peace with which you wish to surround us.
There is much for us to learn as we wait in this strange land of uncertainty, and
you will teach us, if we are open to your voice speaking into our hearts.
And so we meet together, in this virtual way, to sing your praises, to share in
prayer,
to listen to your words, and to explore their meaning for our lives.
We meet in trust and hope.

And we pray, lead us forward in your ways, deliver us from all that would harm
us, and take us to the place you would have us be, so that we, your church,
across the city of Salford, we your individual people, may worship and serve you
most effectively, now and in the days and months ahead.
We offer this time to you in the name of Jesus, and we share in the prayer that
he taught us:-

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your Name,
Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever. Amen.*

So this is Lent. It's a time of the year that seems to come round so frequently -
how can it be a year since we last embarked on Lent? And what a year it's been!

In most years, as we begin Lent, I might be asking you questions, such as did
you enjoy pancakes last Tuesday - though I'd not ask you how many you ate?

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And what have you given up, or taken on for Lent this year?
Maybe some of you have done - give something up or taken something on for these weeks of Lent leading up to Holy Week and Easter. Well done if you have!

But right now, I want to say - don't beat yourself up if you haven't!

This year is strange enough without doing guilt on top of everything else. In reality we have given up loads of things at present - things that have always helped to make our lives good - and we've not given them up from choice but of necessity. We want the world to become a safe place to exist one more, and we have given up our freedom in order to let it happen, and in the faith and hope that it ultimately will happen.

I'm not going to labour temptation this morning either.
And actually - whatever tempts you - in moderation - now and again is probably ok if it helps to keep our spirits up!

What I do want to do today is explore the verses from Mark's Gospel set for today. They tell us the events of long ago, perhaps without much of the detail of the other gospels, but I think they can offer us a clear message for now. So let's hear Mark's account of the very beginning of Jesus's journey into mission and ministry.

Bible Reading: Mark 1: 9 - 15

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." 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.

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Hymn: Hear the call of the Kingdom

*Hear the call of the Kingdom, lift your eyes to the King,
Let His song rise within you as a fragrant offering,
Of how God rich in mercy came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in His unfailing grace.*

*Hear the call of the Kingdom to be children of light,
With the mercy of heaven, the humility of Christ,*

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*Walking justly before Him, loving all that is right,
That the life of Christ may shine through us.*

*King of Heaven we will answer the call,
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

*Hear the call of the Kingdom to reach out to the lost,
With the Father's compassion in the wonder of the cross,
Bringing peace and forgiveness and a hope yet to come,
Let the nations put their trust in Him.*

*King of Heaven we will answer the call,
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name.*

We've been dipping in and out of Mark's gospel over these first few weeks of 2021, but today on the first Sunday in Lent, we go right back to almost the beginning of the Gospel.

In today's reading we see Jesus, at the start of his ministry. He has left Nazareth and gone down to the banks of the River Jordan, not a great distance away probably just a few hours walking. Though it's not exactly clear where exactly in the Jordan John was doing his baptising. I believe there is a church in the Holy Land for every moment that's mentioned in the gospels. And the baptism of Jesus is no exception. But the Jordan winds for quite a long distance, so I don't know if anybody knows for certain where John was doing his baptising. And we can't be certain exactly where Jesus went into the wilderness either, though that too is marked by a site in the Judean desert quite close to Jericho, and not very far from the River Jordan.

Those matters aren't particularly important, except that it helps to put a bit of flesh on the scanty information that is given to us by Mark. On a particular day Jesus went to a particular place to see what John the Baptist was up to, and whilst he was there he asked to be baptised himself. In the other gospels we're told a lot more, but Mark, the oldest of the gospels just tells us that as Jesus came up out of the water, and as he did so, he heard God's voice saying to him - "you are my Son who I love. I am well pleased with you." God, in that moment, is confirming to Jesus himself that he was the chosen one - the person on whom the whole of history, the history of this world is hinged, the Messiah - the promised leader of his people.

That took a bit of unpacking for Jesus. He probably knew he was special - the few indications we have of him before this moment suggest that he already felt very close to God. But now a voice speaking into his mind and heart, perhaps

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even into his ears, though there is no indication here that anyone else could hear it; there is a voice telling him that he is God's chosen and beloved son. Those words give direction to Jesus's life in that moment. Jesus didn't turn around and head for home, back to his working in wood, and his family and everything familiar. He went instead into the wildest and most hostile place around - the dry rocky desert - where he remained for 40 days - working out what on earth it was all about - unpacking his possible choices of direction, and seeking God's will. In spite of the dangers of hunger and thirst, and wild animals, and the dark thoughts of his own mind, he tossed around the possibilities and wrestled until he felt clear what God wanted him to do.

So what does that few short verses in Mark's Gospel have to say to us today - here and now - during a time of pandemic? As Jesus himself needed to unpack the meaning of the words he heard from God, so we need to unpack that gospel passage, bit by bit, and see how it relates to our situations and our thinking here and now in Lent 2021.

So first of all we're told - the Spirit sent him. The Spirit of God - the Holy Spirit - sent Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus, we know from the passage, had just been baptised. He'd just heard God's voice confirming him as the long awaited Messiah. And God also affirmed him - I'm really pleased with you. Then the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness.

How did Jesus hear God's voice? How do any of us hear God's voice? It was most likely speaking into his heart and mind: as I say, Mark doesn't suggest that anyone else heard the voice - just Jesus. In which case, this must have been a moment Jesus talked about with others - his disciples perhaps? I think we sometimes think we know everything that Jesus ever said, but the Gospels are not always too hot on the details, and they are certainly not a diary of every day of Jesus's life in ministry. The words they record are important but they are far from everything. And I guess that Jesus chatted about his experiences with his friends - and some things stuck in their memories. And my thinking is that the same voice within him - the Spirit of God - spoke those words of confirmation and encouragement, and then spoke further, and encouraged him to get away from it all and make sense of what it all meant.

So what began as a day out checking up on John Baptist became 40 days and nights in the most hostile terrain possible.

The wilderness is a beautiful but dangerous place, full of rocky cliffs and chasms, dry and dusty and desolate. It's extremely hot, lacking in shade, lacking in water, but it's strangely beautiful. And it was a place Jesus could be alone to make sense of things. And there Mark says - he was tempted by Satan.

Mark gives Satan a capital letter as in a name. But actually at the time of Jesus the word satan was as much a verb as a noun, and not really a name at all. It meant animosity and opposition as a verb, and accuser or enemy as a noun. It's

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the Christian church that has tended to add the capital letter, and see Satan as a figure of temptation - an enemy. I have to admit that I struggle with the idea of a figure with horns and a forked tail stalking around and putting obstacles in Jesus's way. But it makes sense to me that if God, the Holy Spirit, can speak words of encouragement to Jesus and words of direction, that there can have been other voices speaking into his mind too. Perhaps those other voices came from within himself - the negative thoughts - the struggles with what God was calling him to, the wondering about the extent of his own power, the anxieties at what might lay ahead if he walked the path to which he was called. Jesus could have just walked home, gone back to Nazareth, gone back to the easy life, back to those who loved him. But he didn't. He stayed with himself, alone in the isolation of the wilderness and wrestled with all kinds of thoughts, trying to find the way forward.

Perhaps our time in the wilderness of lockdown isolation has had elements of just what Jesus was experiencing. There are days when everything seems negative and a struggle. There are days when our minds tell us that all is bad and pull down of spirits. There are days when we can feel physically and mentally exhausted by all that is happening around us, days when we don't want to get up and face it all. Days when we'd rather hide. So many people across this world have found themselves in a place of mental struggle when the normal structures and pillars of our life have been stripped away. It's been a huge problem, and still is. Jesus too found himself in such a place. He certainly didn't come up out of the waters of baptism and feel ready to tackle a life of ministry. And I wonder if he was just tempted to head for home and ignore the voice of God within his heart?

But he stayed there, there in the wilderness, for 40 days and nights without food or drink. Actually Mark doesn't mention the food and drink at all. The other Gospel writers add a bit more but not Mark. Mark tells us that there were wild beasts around him and that the angels ministered to him. Jesus was somehow protected as he went through all his soul-searching. 40 days is a long time. What were you doing 40 days ago? I make that January 13th. In any other year we'd be thinking of the vast array of things we've done since January 13th. This year with so many days being so much the same as each other it's not nearly so dramatic. But it still a long time. I make it 40 breakfasts, 40 lunches, 40 dinners, 40 times a lot of cups of tea! 40 sleeps. 40 goes at daily exercise. 40 times quite a few news bulletins and pandemic briefings.

For 40 days Jesus went over and over in his mind, pondering what it all meant, and making sense of it all. He pushed aside the ideas of showing his power for dramatic effect, or for the benefit of his own or others' physical needs. He turned his back on testing the boundaries of what was possible. And he planned a path that took him, not to the capital city and the people of power, not to a place where he could tackle the Roman oppressors head on, not to his own home town even, but up into the Galilee - a rural area of farmers and fisherman, a

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backwater of the civilised world, and he began his path into a new adventure which changed this world from the inside out.

So let's think about us for a moment. We've been in the wilderness quite a long time. We've been deprived of so many things in our lives. Not food and drink. Not shelter and security. But so much that has always been normal in our lives has been taken away from us. And we can't choose the time when we can emerge from this wilderness, which makes it even harder! We don't know when we will be released - it's not our decision to take. Though we remain optimistic that it won't be too long now.

I guess every one of us has wrestled with what has been happening. I guess we have succumbed to temptations too. The temptation to criticise others. The temptation to bemoan the place in which we've found ourselves. The temptation to try and find someone to blame. The temptation to drown our sorrows in a whole range of temptations. And I guess we've wrestled with what comes next, what the next steps will be. What do we do when we finally come out? We may have been tempted to leave the path we were previously on and veer off in to another direction. We may have felt angry with God that he has let this happen to us, and to his world? We may just feel angry and sad and frustrated. We may have spent a lot of time thinking about how it was before all this pandemic, and longed to be back there. But for us, like Jesus in the wilderness, there is no way back. The past is done with. We can't turn back the clock, and cancel this past year with all its deprivations and experiences, its sadnesses, and losses. We can't go back. We can only go forward. And like Jesus, we too will emerge from this wilderness one day, perhaps soon - hopefully soon. We will emerge on a different path. A path into a new future. It's a future full of hope, full of good experiences, a future full of people we haven't seen properly for so long, a future of laughter and hugs, and conversations and sharing. But it is also a future that will need some building, some prayerful thought and consideration. It will be a future that leads us forwards, not backwards. But as God in Christ has been in our past and is in our present, God will surely be at the heart of our future, leading us forward, encouraging new possibilities, strengthen us for new directions, and equipping us and drawing us onwards, just as he did for Jesus. Our path will never be as tough as the one Jesus had to take, but as God provided for Jesus with companions to share the journey, for conversation and laughter, for support and for encouragement, so we will be there for one another, inching forward together.

This Lent I give you permission not to give anything up! You have given up enough in this past year. And I give you permission not to feel guilty if you feel a little tempted. Give yourself a treat from time to time. Whatever your chosen treat might be!

But the one thing I ask of you this Lent, is do a bit of wrestling with the way ahead. Wrestling with what God might be calling you to do, or to be. Wrestling with what God might be asking you to take up, or to give up. Wrestle with the

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way we need to take, in order to move into the next stage in the life of God's church here in Salford. The future belongs to all of us, and we belong to God who loves us and leads us onwards. I end as I began with those words from Psalm 25:

Show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long.

Prayers

We exist in a wilderness - a barren place, lacking so many things we would prefer to have in our lives right now. But you, our God, are in the wilderness with us, protecting us and loving us, ready to guide and inspire us forwards. And so we bring our prayers to you for this glorious and beautiful, but often barren and tragic world.

When we are tempted to criticise our government - our leaders - those who are supposed to keep our country safe - those we trusted, instead of criticising - help us to pray for them in all the decisions they take. We pray for them now - the leaders of the nations of this world - the leaders of our own nation - our local community leaders, and all in positions of responsibility.

When we're tempted to focus only on our own needs - instead encourage us to think of others - to find something practical we can do to help someone else. Encourage us to pray for those in need - those who are sick with the Covid-19 virus, and those whose lives have been changed for ever by its affects. We pray for all whose needs are in so many ways greater than ours right now.

When we are tempted to complain that things are not moving fast enough or in the right direction for us, in terms of the life of our churches, encourage us to pray for our church families - one family really - the family of the Salford Circuit. We pray now for one another as the church here, not buildings standing idle and empty, not diminished church bank balances, not community groups we are failing to welcome at present - but the church - us - each one of us - none of us needing more or less prayer than any of the others - all of us part of the next step in the life of God's church here. All of us loved for exactly who we are. All of us struggling - but hopeful of a brighter day. We pray for your church now.

We may sometimes be tempted into despair and hopelessness. But you, our loving living God, are always by our side, less than a breath away. We pray, turn our despair into hope, and our lack of trust in confidence of a brighter future ahead. And when the time is right, turn our inactivity in

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energy for the future, and all our sadness into joy, as we step forwards in your name. Thank you, loving living God. Amen.

Lent goes on for several weeks now. May God by His Spirit speak to you, reassure you, affirm you and encourage you through this time.

Let's end our service with another song that you probably won't know, but I'm not apologising for that. I believe this is what God is saying to us right now - Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Hymn: Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled

*Do not let your hearts be troubled, fear nothing, I am here,
Peace I leave, my peace I give you, trust completely, do not fear.
Holy Spirit now your helper always is by your side, with
Confidence in anxious moments, peaceful comforter and guide.*

*In all things God's goodness follows those who give their lives to Him,
In all troubled time's He's present, loving, giving peace within,
We are more than conquerors through Jesus, our Saviour and so
None can separate us from Him, all is safely in His hand.*

In all things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And so may the blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all this day, this Lent, throughout this year ahead, and forever more. Amen.

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Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah - William Williams
Translated by Peter Williams, Music: John Hughes, of Pontypridd

Hear The Call Of The Kingdom - Keith Getty, Kristyn Getty & Stuart Townend
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Yearning (Prayer) - Clare Stainsby

Do Not Let Your Hearts Be Troubled - Clare Stainsby
Performed by Chapter and Verse