

Morning Prayer 21st February 2021

The First Sunday of Lent

Service with Helen Rose Wilson



Personal preparation before the service begins.

Please take time to remember where you are,
and why you are here.
Give thanks and become still
in the presence of God

PRELUDE

GATHERING IN

Grace, mercy and peace
from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ
be with you.

And also with you.

We sing the first verse of our first

Song:

ACF 82 Lord, I come before Your throne of grace

1. Lord, I come before Your throne of grace;
I find rest in Your presence,
and fulness of joy.
In worship and wonder I behold Your face,
singing what a faithful God have I.

Chorus

*What a faithful God have I,
what a faithful God.*

*What a faithful God have I,
faithful in ev'ry way.*

Come, let us return to the Lord and say:

**God our Father,
long-suffering, full of grace and truth,
you create us from nothing and give us life.
You give your faithful people new life in the water
of baptism.
You do not turn your face from us,
nor cast us aside.
We confess that we have sinned
against you and our neighbour.
We have wounded your love and marred your
image in us.
Restore us for the sake of your Son,
and bring us to heavenly joy,
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**

May the Father of all mercies
cleanse us from our sins,
and restore us in his image
to the praise and glory of his name,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

We respond with the second and third verses of our
first **song**:

2. Lord of mercy, You have heard my cry;
through the storm You're the beacon,
My song in the night.
In the shelter of Your wings, hear my heart's reply,
singing what a faithful God have I.

Chorus
*What a faithful God have I,
what a faithful God.
What a faithful God have I,
faithful in ev'ry way.*

3. Lord all sov'reign, granting peace from heav'n.
let me comfort those who suffer
with the comfort You have giv'n.

I will tell of Your great love for as long as I live,
singing what a faithful God have I.

Chorus

*What a faithful God have I,
what a faithful God.
What a faithful God have I,
faithful in ev'ry way.*

CCLI Song # 605095
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We pray together with words from Psalm 25:

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust;

do not let me be put to shame;

do not let my enemies exult over me.

Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all day long.

Be mindful of your mercy,

O Lord, and of your steadfast love,

for they have been from of old.

Do not remember the sins of my youth or my
transgressions;

according to your steadfast love remember me,
for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

Good and upright is the Lord;

therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son,
and to the Holy Spirit,

As it was in the beginning,

is now and shall be for ever.

The collect for the first Sunday of Lent

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.

The reading is taken from the Book of Genesis, chapter 9, verse 8 to 17.

Let us prepare ourselves for the word of God
Our hearts and our minds are open

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: 'I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you – the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you – every living creature on earth. I establish my covenant with you: never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

And God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.'

So God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.'

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark, chapter 1, verses 9 to 15

Glory to you, O Lord

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised 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 for 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!'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Homily



*“Oh what a wonderful scene,
the rainbow overhead:”*

These are the opening lines of “Captain Noah and his Floating Zoo”, a “Cantata in popular style” by Michael Flanders and Joseph Horowitz from 1970. As a member of the Junior Choir, I sang this in a concert version under my father’s direction – with all of us lined up on the stage in our rainbow-hued tops. When I read the Old Testament lesson a few weeks ago, this was one of the first thoughts that occurred to me. A little research in YouTube revealed that the cantata is still being performed – I can recommend a viewing! – and I am grateful to Solveyg that she will be singing it for us as the postlude. Of all the songs that the cantata contains, this is the one that I still know by heart. I can hope that this is because of the simple but fundamental message it conveys – and not just because the sung lists of animals were such tongue-twisters!

Certainly, the opening two lines resonate at another level, as I find rainbows to be objects of great beauty, which I always take time to appreciate if I see one. A particularly memorable one appeared on the afternoon after my godson’s Confirmation service, when we were gathered in his home for “Kaffee und Kuchen”. The Genesis passage we have just heard had also been the focus of his Baptism service – a “Krabbelgottesdienst” that was attended by plenty of toy animals along with the infants to be baptised – such that a rainbow was the main symbol decorating his baptismal candle. The rainbow’s occurrence on his Confirmation day seemed to me to be more than just a coincidence but a reminder that the covenant that God had made with “all life on earth” also applied to the fresh confirmer.

The first verse of the song continues with the lines:

*“violet, indigo, blue and green,
yellow, orange and red!”*

Yet another reason for appreciating rainbows is related to the fact that I am a physicist who has spent most of her working life using the “colours of the rainbow” within spectrophotometers to investigate materials that transmit, reflect or convert solar energy. There is an anecdote that attributes the naming of the “seven colours of the rainbow” to the great mathematician and physicist, Isaac Newton. The order in which the colours are listed is indeed physically correct, based on his observations of light that had been dispersed by a prism. However, his naming of seven individual colours was influenced more by the fact that he was also a deeply religious man, for whom God’s creation was good and perfect – such that the number of rainbow colours had to be the “perfect number” of seven, corresponding to the number of days of creation – again, according to Genesis. This is a degree of literalism with which I have difficulty; I would be equally happy to leave out “indigo” and have six named colours of the rainbow, or as an alternative, to take “all the colours that lie between” into account, as happens in the next verses of the song:

*“This is my promise to you,
the rainbow overhead:
violet, indigo, blue and green,
all the colours that lie between
violet, indigo, blue and green,
yellow, orange and red!”*

*You’ll see the rainbow in the sky,
you’ll know God’s words are true.*

However, the “colours that lie between” violet and red are clearly not the main point of these verses; this is the role of the first and final lines, referring to the covenant between God and all life on earth that is at the centre of today’s Old Testament reading. This is the point where I must leave a strictly scientific approach aside, trying to “explain” rainbows in terms of refraction and dispersion. Analogously, I do not need to worry about whether pairs of all living creatures on earth really could have fitted into an arc with the

dimensions that are specified in such minute detail a few chapters earlier in Genesis. What I can do, as a scientist, is to recognise that the Bible uses many literary forms, including that of mythology, to express the experiences that humankind has made with God – and God with humankind. The narrative of Noah, his family and all his animal companions on the arc conveys a message to me about God offering us hope even in situations which threaten to inundate us. That the rainbow, visibly connecting the heavens and the earth, is portrayed as a symbol of God's covenant simply adds another dimension to its beauty – and its significance.

Judith can confirm that I was hesitant about accepting her invitation to give a message at this service. I will admit that this was partly because I had realised that this would be the First Sunday of Lent, when the allocated Gospel passages address Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and I was unsure about trying to interpret extensive conversations between Jesus and a personified Satan. When I actually looked up the selection of Bible passages, it was the Genesis passage which won me over, but also the realisation that the thoughts which the rainbow stimulated could also help me with the Gospel text. The Gospel writer, Mark, assisted me further by being so succinct, compressing the ideas elaborated by Matthew and Luke over 11 or 13 verses into just two. Pursuing the idea of literary forms further, I can understand the first sentence, "At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan." as a metaphor for the struggle between conflicting thoughts of vocation and doubt, which Jesus needed to resolve before commencing his ministry.

As we begin Lent this year, some of us may be feeling that the Lent of 2020 lasted not only 40 days but has continued for more than a year now. The "satanic thoughts" that may be troubling us at present may be less those of greed, lust for power and hybris, as recounted by Luke and Matthew, at a time when we have been taught the limits of our power against a

microscopically small virus. Instead, feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, frustration, exhaustion and doubt may be the current tormenters. Realising that Jesus, God in human form, may have struggled with similar thoughts, may already be some comfort, knowing that we are not going through this experience alone. Observing from the second sentence, “He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.” that the “wild animals” are grouped grammatically, not with Satan, but with the attendant angels, suggests to me that Jesus may not have been completely alone with his own conflicting thoughts. The “wild animals” may be a reminder that God’s covenant was not only between him and Noah, but also with “every living creature”. Reflection on our own relationship with the living creatures around us (maybe even including a microscopic virus), on our mutual interdependence within the order that God intended to be good – these may be further Lenten exercises that can sustain us in demanding times. A third approach may come by recognising the role of the “angels”, God’s messengers. How often through humankind’s long relationship with God have these angels not only looked like humans but have in fact been real humans of flesh and blood? Maybe their mention in our Gospel passage indicates to us the importance of supporting each other directly, using the methods that are accessible to us in our corona-constricted time – a phone call, a letter, a warm meal handed over on the doorstep, a Zoom service ...

In its compactness, the Gospel appointed for today leads us beyond the forty days onto Jesus proclaiming “the good news of God”. Ideally, our reflections and actions during Lent will prepare us also to share in this task, which can take a multitude of forms and does not need to wait until after Easter. But even during a “wilderness period”, God can sustain us through agents and in ways that we may not have been expecting – if we are receptive to them. Maybe marvelling at the beauty of a rainbow, remembering God’s covenant and sharing this memory with others is already a first step.

Amen.

**We sing the song:
SoF 593 What a friend we have in Jesus**

What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
ev'rything to God in pray'r!
Oh what peace we often forfeit!
Oh what needless pain we bear!
All because we do not carry
ev'rything to God in pray'r.

2. Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in pray'r.
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in pray'r.

3. Are we weak and heavy-laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Saviour, still our refuge,
take it to the Lord in prayer.
Do thy friends despise, forsake thee?
Take it to the Lord in prayer;
in His arms He'll take and shield thee,
thou wilt find a solace there.

CCLI Song # 7056820
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Intercessions (by William)

The Lord's Prayer

In the language of our hearts, let us pray as our
Saviour taught us

