

2023 February 5th. Third Sunday before Lent.

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 112:1-9;

1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Have you ever wondered why we have so many readings on a Sunday morning? Four readings, from across the whole Bible. Perhaps it feels like too many: surely the important bit is the Gospel reading about the life of Christ, or maybe the Epistle reading about how to live life as Christians; maybe the important bit is the Old Testament reading which sets the scene for God's redeeming acts throughout history, or maybe the Psalm which calls us to offer our worship to God. We can make an argument for any of the four being the most important.

Today's Gospel reading explains to us why we have so many readings every Sunday morning. Jesus said "I have come, not to abolish the words written long ago in the Old Testament (he called it "the law and the prophets") but to fulfil them, to bring them to life." If we want to understand anything about Jesus: why he was born, why he died, why he rose, why he taught the things he said and did the actions he did, we need to look back to the Old Testament; if we want to know why Jesus' life and death, words and actions matter today, we need to look at the New Testament, and if we want to know what it was that Jesus said and did between his birth and death and resurrection, we need to read the Gospels.

Reading the Bible raises questions for us. Am I basically a good person or am I really not good? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen for bad people? Why is it so hard to do right and so easy to make wrong choices? Why is life confusing? If we really try to live by God's word we will find ourselves facing difficult questions as well as moments of joyful realisation. The Psalms give us words to praise God, to question God, even to get angry with God when the world seems unfair to us or those we love.

In our Gospel today, Jesus has told those who follow him, both his disciples two thousand years ago and us today, that we are to shine like lights, shine like him, shine with the light and love and life of God in us so that when people see us they will see something of God and be drawn to him. That sounds like a fine and holy thing, but also a bit scary. For we know that we do not always reflect God's goodness and glory. Maybe already today you've flown into a rage over something small and petty, maybe you're saving your anger for later, but, if you're anything like me, you will know that often when people look at you, it's not the glory of God that comes first to mind.

Jesus goes on to remind us that we need to keep God's law, live God's way all day and every day. Can we do it? All the evidence suggests not.

That is what the reading from Isaiah also says. We know how we should live, but so often we only go through the motions - and if your mind has already wandered into other things while you've been reading this or singing a hymn, you'll know exactly what he means. Left to our own devices we often look no different from people who have no love for God in their hearts, and maybe even worse because we claim to have God's love in our hearts.

Yet, Isaiah offers us hope for how to live God's way when we so often find it difficult. He promises a vindicator who will go before us, and that God himself will go behind us. God's glory will surround us on every side so that we cannot help but shine with his light and walk in his path.



When we see those words we think of Jesus, the light of the world; Jesus who lived on earth and went about among people way back then; Jesus who lives in us today by the power of the Spirit. Suddenly we begin to see that even frail people like us who find it so hard to live the Jesus way, to live up to the Jesus way, every day, even we can reflect the light of Christ in a dark world. We can do this, not because we are great and holy, but because God is great and holy, and through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, God is making us holy. Making us holy will take God a whole lifetime, fortunately, a whole lifetime is exactly what God has given us.

So, Sunday by Sunday, day by day, we read the scriptures, the Old Testament and New Testament, the Gospels and the Epistles, the Psalms and the prophecies to reveal to us what God's glorious holiness looks like, so that we know what to copy and so that we can see that holiness in other people, and give thanks.

Image: Holman Hunt "The Light of the World"

2023 February 12th. Second before Lent.

Genesis 1:1-2:3; Psalm 136;

Romans 8:18-25; Matthew 6:25-end.

What do you worry about? Is it global matters: the climate crisis, warfare, international politics? Is it national matters: the cost-of-living crisis, NHS, education, strikes and pay claims? Is it personal matters: children, parents, health, bills, money? There is so much to worry about, and not only when we wake in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep.

So, how do you feel when you read Jesus' words "Do not worry"? Do you feel relief, or do you feel irritation? Do you want to say "Look, Jesus, if I didn't worry about what to eat or what to wear everyone in this household would go hungry and naked. Don't you tell me not to worry"!

If Jesus meant only "There, there, dear; stop worrying", then his words would be unhelpful, patronising even. But I don't think that is what he means. He says "don't worry" shortly after he teaches his disciples the Lord's Prayer, and I think that is significant.



When we worry we behave as though everything depends on us. We take the weight of the worries on our own shoulders, and whether we are worrying about one small thing in our lives, or a global disaster, all the worrying in the world will not solve the problem. Worrying can lead only to failure, which is a worrying thought. As Jesus said, does worrying make you taller? Can worrying help you live longer? No, in fact, worrying makes you shrink and reduces the quality, and even the quantity of your life.

Jesus reminds us that the worries are really God's worries: he worries about the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, and he worries about us. He knows our needs and supplies our needs. Our worrying changes nothing, but God can change everything. That is why rather than inviting us to worry about the world, Jesus taught us to pray: "give us bread; give us forgiveness, give us yourself". In this way we let God transform us and our world, through us and for us, beyond our power to worry.

So, do I worry? Sadly, yes, I worry a lot. I can worry about anything; I do worry about many things. I forget that I cannot change the world, but God has already changed the world. Still, sometimes, when the chips are down, when all seems like a disaster, when I realise that I am not clever enough, or strong enough, or important enough to change everything, then I remember to pray "thy will be done" and sometimes I even manage to take notice that God's will is being done, has been done, will be done, and that God has already changed and transformed whatever I was worrying about.

Our reading from Genesis was probably first written down by and for people who had been taken from their homeland and transported into exile. They had lost their homes, their temple, their king, members of their family. Surely they had something to worry about. And yet, what they have left to us, more than 2,500 years later, is not their worried wonderings but rather this wonderful list-poem which affirms that God has made the whole world to be good. In their suffering and loss they see the depth of God's resource, the might of his work, the generosity of his gift.

The greatness of God caused the psalmist to repeat the refrain "give thanks to the LORD for his love endures for ever", the love that goes beyond our worrying to transform human lives, to transform the world. The greatness of God caused St Paul to write "our present sufferings are worth nothing compared with the glory that will be revealed in us". It's not that worry isn't real, it's not that worrying, suffering, enduring is unimportant, but rather that we have been given a glimpse of the God who is transforming our world beyond anything our worry can do, and that glimpse gives us hope that God takes seriously the things that worry us.

image https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Field_of_Lilies_-_Tiffany_Studios,_c._1910.JPG
accessed 6/2/23 12.26

Reflection for Sunday Next Before Lent Yr A – 19/2/2023

Exodus 24:12-end

Psalm 2 or 99

2 Peter 1:16-end

Matthew 17:1-9

Mountains feature large in our readings today. Mountains in the Bible are where God is encountered. There are many examples and I thought it might be fun and challenging as well as encouraging us to look things up in our Bibles to set a little quiz.

Can you match up the mountains below with the events to which they relate? The columns DO NOT match up as they are written. See if you can match them. If you need a clue look up the Bible reference. I have only given one reference for each mountain – if you are really keen you might like to find other references!

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| A. Mt Sinai | 1. Where Jesus was transfigured <i>Matthew 17: 1-9</i> |
| B. Mount of Olives | 2. Referred to as Jerusalem itself or the people of God 2 <i>Samuel 5: 1-</i> |
| C. Mt Zion | 3. Where Israelites proclaimed their blessing before entering Promised Land <i>Deuteronomy 11:29</i> |
| D. Mt Tabor | 4. Sermon on the Mount (according to tradition) <i>Matthew 5:1-12</i> |
| E. Mt Nebo | 5. Moses received Ten Commandments <i>Exodus 31:18</i> |
| F. Mt Moriah | 6. Where God grants Moses a vision of the promised land before he dies <i>Deuteronomy 32:49</i> |
| G. Mt Gerizim | 7. Where Noah's Ark touched land again <i>Genesis 8:4</i> |
| H. Mt Eremos | 8. Elijah challenged the priests of Baal here <i>1 Kings 18:16-46</i> |
| I. Mt Ararat | 9. Abraham told to sacrifice Isaac his son <i>Genesis 22:2</i> |
| J. Mt Carmel | 10. Garden of Gethsemane is at the foot of this mountain <i>Luke 22: 39-46</i> |

Prayer for today:

Holy God, you know the disorder of our sinful lives: set straight our crooked hearts, and bend our wills to love your goodness and your glory in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Quiz answers: A5, B10, C2, D1, E6, F9, G3, H4, I7, J8

Tony White

2023 February 22nd - Ash Wednesday

Joel 2:1-2, 12-17; Psalm 51:1-18;

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21.

I will always remember Ash Wednesday 1998. It was the night that John Archer, a character from the eponymous Radio 4 programme, died on the radio in a farming accident. It might seem rather frivolous to start a reflection for one of the solemn Holy Days by referring to a radio soap opera, but it does have a link to some of our readings. Both the prophet Joel and St Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 remind us that we never know when we will die, when we will find ourselves face to face with God, when we will face judgement for all that we have done or left undone. On Wednesday 25th February 1998, as I set off to church with the agonised cries of Tony Archer ringing in my ears, I reflected on my own mortality and how I would face God if my soul were required that night.

The prophet Joel spoke to a people who thought they were rather looking forward to the end of the world, to the Day of the LORD, to the time when God would judge the nations. They expected the Day of the LORD to vindicate them, but the prophet Joel reminded the people that judgement day would judge them too. Whilst other nations had sinned against God's people, God's people had also sinned, and sin is sin whoever commits it.

On Ash Wednesday we recognise that we are all sinners and we are all mortal. We have only one lifetime, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; we have only one lifetime and at the end of it we will face God on his judgement throne, when "Christ shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

I expect that most of us will face God with only "little" sins staining our souls. Little sins of pettiness and bitterness and bitchiness and unkindness and thoughtlessness and selfishness and all those other little sins which we commit daily, or near enough. Most of us will not face God with murder, GBH, extortion, fraud, or any serious crime on our conscious. But sin is sin, whoever commits it. The "little" sins stain just as much as do the big ones. So Judgement Day is real judgement for us too.

But God longs to free us from our sins, to save us from punishment, to judge us as worthy to enter into his presence. So, Joel invites his listeners to hear God's words "return to me with all your hearts" and promises that God is gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love, relenting from punishing. Joel invites us to be ready for judgement day so that we will not face God unprepared, but will have asked, again and again, for God to forgive us and

transform us so that we will be able to face him on judgement day.

St Paul likewise calls us to return to God, to seek forgiveness, to make ourselves ready so that death and judgement will not catch us out. He describes for us the route to salvation, which is through Christ. Jesus stood in our place and took our sin on him, nailed it to the cross with him, bore it into death with him, and left it there. If we are to stand before God we must own up to our sin, hand it over to Jesus and let him deal with us and with our sin, so that we can be freed from it.

St Paul talks about his own experience of the transformation wrought by Christ in his own life. How all that he valued turned out to be worthless compared with God's riches of revelation in Jesus. How all that he had done for himself turned out to be pointless compared with Jesus' actions on his behalf. The Son of God turns judgement on its head by standing in the place of the condemned man, and taking the punishment himself. So all that Paul was and did was turned on his head: all that gave him cause to boast now caused him to be embarrassed; all that made him look weak now gave him confidence in God's strength.

And that leads us to our Gospel reading. We might feel slightly uncomfortable on a day when many of us will be sporting large ash crosses to read Jesus telling us to do our good deeds and to perform our penitential deeds in secret, so that we look happy even on the saddest of days. It is for this reason that some people choose not to be ashed. However, I think that wearing a cross of ash is slightly different from the deliberate disfigurement and pretended penitence of those whom Jesus condemned for hypocrisy in Matthew 6:16-18. We receive the cross of ash to remind us that we cannot, by our own endeavour, put ourselves right: not with ourselves, not with our neighbour, not with God. We need Jesus on the cross to bear our sins, Jesus on the cross to change our hearts, Jesus on the cross to redeem us on Judgement Day.

Whether you wear the cross of ash today or not, remember that you are dust and to dust you will return; turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ, even as he is faithful to you. Amen.



2023 February 26th - First Sunday of Lent.

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Psalm 32;

Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.

If you had faced Satan in the wilderness, what would you have done? If you had been hungry and lonely and frightened, how would you have responded when the devil appeared before you and shewed you sights you had never seen and offered you opportunities you had never taken?



If the devil told you that you could turn stones into bread, what would you do? Stones into bread, not just for yourself: think of the people who would thank you if they could satisfy their hunger with stones from the fields and garden. You could feed the world, you could feed people in sub-Saharan Africa, or in refugee camps, or in war-zones or in British cities and villages. What would you do?

If the devil had taken you to the pinnacle of the Temple, the lantern of Ely Cathedral or the dome of St Paul's and said "jump, because God's angels will save his holy one" what would you have done? Might you have jumped just to prove that you were God's holy one, just to shew the devil that he couldn't meddle with God's people, just to prove that God really does save the ones he loves. What would you do?

If the devil shewed you all the kingdoms of the world and said "you can have all of these if you just worship me" what would you do? Think what you could do if you could displace tyrants, dictators, war-lords, self-seeking, aggrandizing, corrupt or just incompetent rulers.

Think how you could make the world a better place, make laws for the fair distribution of wealth and resources, for the dignity of men, women and children regardless of race, creed, colour, sexual orientation, for the welfare of animals and plants and the whole world. Surely, just acknowledging the devil once wouldn't change your desire and intention to do good. What would you do?

In our daydreams, in our plans and intentions we are good. But we know how easy it is to let the high standards slip, how easy it is to let good intentions get lost, how easy it is for absolute power to corrupt absolutely. However you read the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis, we can all recognise a fundamental truth there: we are all tempted to sin and we all often give in to temptation.

Faced with the wiles of the devil, we all fail. We fail through ignorance because we do not understand the consequences of our actions. We fail through weakness, because we run out of the energy or the courage or the patience to do the right thing. We fail through our own deliberate fault, because sometimes being bad feels good, and sometimes feeling good towards ourselves matters more than doing good to others.

But Jesus didn't fail, doesn't fail, will never fail. Like us, Jesus was fully human, and so he was not immune to the temptations of sin, the world and the devil. That is why the devil can tempt him with food for himself and food for the world, recognition for himself and recognition for his cause, power for himself and power for his programme. These were real temptations even for Jesus. Unlike us, Jesus was fully divine; he could see beyond the immediate opportunities to God's purpose, and so he could say no to every one of the devil's offers.

At the end of these events in the desert, we are told that the devil left Jesus and angels came to minister to him. Sometimes when we look at the world, at the people and places where evil, the works of the devil, seem to be in the ascendancy; at our own lives and our failure to live up to our own expectations, never mind to God's kingdom values, sometimes we forget that the devil left Jesus, the devil has been defeated. All the devil's lies are truly empty words because he has no power of himself.

If the devil should come to you today, to offer you a deal that looks too good to be true, offer him Jesus, and the devil will go; for by the power in weakness of Jesus, the devil has been overthrown and destroyed. Thanks be to God.

image: Botticelli *The Temptations of Christ*. Sistine Chapel