



Personal service 21 February 2021

Journeying in earthliness writ large,
living deeply within our honest searchings,
immersed in the rawness of our temptations:
the Christ holds the faith in fragile arms.
Standing in the wilderness,
surrounded by our toughest questions
and human in every struggling way:
the Christ walks with life wide open ahead of us,
truly human, truly God,
trustworthy in life and trustworthy in death.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon

StF 53/ HP 8 How shall I sing that majesty (or if using MP 327 Immortal,
Invisible)

Prayers of approach and confession:

Dear God, as we enter the journey towards Easter, the invitation into a
time of reflection, we grieve our human failures as we face some parts of
our lives. *[Pause for reflection]*

Here, in this time of following you, the Christ, down into the realities of who
we are and what we do or fail to do, we know that we can never earn the
costly grace which you offer to us. *[Pause for reflection]*

Stay with us here, loving Jesus.

Stay with us, even as we know the truth about ourselves, for we ask it in
your name. Amen.

Dorothy McRae-McMahon

Old Testament reading - Genesis 9: 8-17

Gospel - Mark 1: 9-15

StF 233/ HP 132 When Jesus came to Jordan

Reflection:

‘Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Turn away
from sin and be faithful to Christ.’ These are the words spoken as we
receive the ashing on Ash Wednesday, or would have done, if it had
happened this year. We are reminded that we are finite, fragile creatures.
We are reminded of boundaries, of the limitations of our existence, which
are built into the model of what it is to be human. We live most of the time
in our own little world; in Lent we are stretched, called to connect ourselves

with a bigger world, to ask ourselves difficult questions - 'Who am I within this bigger world? Who or what do I depend on? What do I need for life?'

The story of the flood is thought to have been written down around the time of the exile in the sixth century BCE - a devastating experience which represented the total disruption of Israel. It is likely that the story of the flood which sweeps away all living things except those preserved in the ark, is a way of expressing the horror of exile. The covenant subsequently made by God with Noah and his descendants is a covenant with the whole of creation, affirming the link between God's love and all life on earth. Noah is the steward of creation, the ark is the work of preservation. But, it is suggested, the ark won't be necessary anymore, because never again will God allow his anger to overcome his love. The rainbow becomes a sign of hope and new beginnings: we can't go back to the world as it was at creation - violence has happened, but the rainbow represents peace and reconciliation, a bond of loyalty and commitment (this is poetry, not science!). And in the wake of the destructiveness caused by human beings, God continues to give us responsibility for our planet, and all with whom we share it.

Lent is an opportunity to be challenged about our link with the rest of creation, to take a look at ourselves and our lifestyle. The rich world, especially, has tended to assume that the raw materials produced by evolution, eg. fossil fuels, are there to be exploited for our convenience - and those who are bearing the brunt of the effects of global warming are mainly the poorer countries of the world. We are seeing the dire effects of microplastics on marine life, and experiencing the consequences of atmospheric pollution. The global pandemic is also showing up some instinctive human behaviours - it may be great news for us that the UK government bought up so many doses of vaccine early on, but what about those in the world who are going to the back of the queue as a result?

Lent may be a challenge to us to remove some of our safety nets. It is a season in which we are encouraged to do some 'stripping down', self-examination, recognising who we are and our place in creation. We depend on God, as Noah did. Lent gives us the chance to stop and ask what life is about, how are we using our time and our opportunities?

Jesus goes into the desert to tackle these questions, to find out what his ministry is to be about. Mark is very brief on the subject - he is 'driven out' into the wilderness by the Spirit. Jesus has been affirmed by the voice of God in his baptism, then thrust out to a place of danger to be tested, to learn who he is among the wild beasts. He is at one with the rest of creation, he learns that he is sustained in the midst of danger. Jesus'

experience in the wilderness is the temptation to centre his life on that which is not God.

We can often feel helpless in the world, with the sense of vast institutions and the culture of society creating expectations of what is right and normal. It can be as though we are being carried along on an impersonal tide. But our small choices matter - what we buy, how we spend our money and our time, the quality of our relationships with each other. All these things matter in our relationship with God, they are something to be offered in confidence and hope, because we are held in God's love.

Today is Church Action on Poverty Sunday. CPAG exists to give a voice to the experts on poverty - those who live with its effects day by day. Its core function is 'to uphold the dignity, agency and power of people struggling against poverty, and the ability of people to come together to bring about positive and transformational change, for individuals, communities and wider society' (from 'Spark' newsletter, winter 2021).

Human beings and communities are made for transformation and growth towards fuller life. God comes to us where we are, not where we feel we ought to be. Jesus knew where he was, so he was able to recognise the angels. Too often we try to live a life which is distorted, perhaps dominated by competition with others, by guilt at not achieving what we think we should, as though that is what we are here for. Our 'small self' can be self-protecting, grasping, easily hurt. Lent is for finding our real self, the self that can accept vulnerability and the gifts of whatever angels may be around. God always offers new beginnings, new ways of seeing, good news.

Prayers of intercession:

Gracious God, we pray for our world and all its peoples, remembering Myanmar at this time of political turmoil, Yemen, suffering from ongoing civil war, shortages of food and medicines, the Uygur population of China, Palestine-Israel, and all places where human well-being is threatened.

We pray for all suffering from or bereaved by Covid, for those working in medical and social care services, and in vaccine production, for researchers and politicians, and all with responsibilities for public policy in the face of the virus.

We give thanks for human kindness and solidarity, for self-sacrifice and acts of generosity and justice.

We pray for ourselves at this time of Lent, that we may give time to discovering ourselves within your bigger story, that we may see with

fresh eyes.

We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. A prayer for Church Action on Poverty Sunday:
Lord Jesus, the fabric of our society has been patched many times, and yet still there are holes
the places where the poor and vulnerable struggle to exist. As we face a future in which virus, climate and politics threaten deeper gashes in the web of community,
we pray that you will guide us to create a new garment of justice, so that those who suffer now may join with all in drinking the new wine of your love in the fresh wineskins of a changed world.
We ask this in your name.

Nick Jowett

Lord's Prayer

StF 687 One human family God has made

Or HF 402 For the healing of the nations

Or MP 866 In the streets of every city

May the mystery of God beckon us;

May the wisdom of God direct us; May

the forgiveness of God heal us;

May the energy of God send us into the world to
exercise justice and love,

And be a blessing to the nations.

The Word in the World