



21st February 2021
1st Sunday of Lent

The Gathering

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Greeting

We meet in the presence of God
who knows our needs,
hears our cries,
feels our pain,
and heals our wounds.

Song: Forty days and forty nights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5Ng4YXlcX8>

Prayers of Penitence

We confess our sin, and the sins of our society,
in the misuse of God's creation.
God our Father, we are sorry
for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly,
and acted ungratefully.
Hear our prayer, and in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We enjoy the fruits of the harvest,
but sometimes forget that you have given them to us.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We belong to a people who are full and satisfied,
but ignore the cry of the hungry.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We are thoughtless,
and do not care enough for the world you have made.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We store up goods for ourselves alone,
as if there were no God and no heaven.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

The Lord enrich us with his grace,
and nourish us with his blessing;
the Lord defend us in trouble and keep us from all evil;
the Lord accept our prayers,
and absolve us from our offences,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.

Collect

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 Liturgy of the Word

Isaiah 43

But now, this is what the LORD says—
 he who created you, Jacob,
 he who formed you, Israel:
“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
 I have summoned you by name; you are mine.
² When you pass through the waters,
 I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
 they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
 you will not be burned;
 the flames will not set you ablaze.
³ For I am the LORD your God,
 the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour;
I give Egypt for your ransom,
 Cush and Seba in your stead.
⁴ Since you are precious and honoured in my sight,
 and because I love you,
I will give people in exchange for you,
 nations in exchange for your life.
⁵ Do not be afraid, for I am with you;
 I will bring your children from the east
 and gather you from the west.
⁶ I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’
 and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’
Bring my sons from afar
 and my daughters from the ends of the earth—

⁷ everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made."

⁸ Lead out those who have eyes but are blind,
who have ears but are deaf.

⁹ All the nations gather together
and the peoples assemble.

Which of their gods foretold this
and proclaimed to us the former things?

Let them bring in their witnesses to prove they were right,
so that others may hear and say, "It is true."

¹⁰ "You are my witnesses," declares the LORD,
"and my servant whom I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.

Before me no god was formed,
nor will there be one after me.

¹¹ I, even I, am the LORD,
and apart from me there is no saviour.

¹² I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
I, and not some foreign god among you.

You are my witnesses," declares the LORD, "that I am God.

¹³ Yes, and from ancient days I am he.

No one can deliver out of my hand.
When I act, who can reverse it?"

¹⁴ This is what the LORD says—
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:

"For your sake I will send to Babylon
and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,
in the ships in which they took pride.

¹⁵ I am the LORD, your Holy One,
Israel's Creator, your King."

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says—
he who made a way through the sea,
a path through the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses,
the army and reinforcements together,
and they lay there, never to rise again,
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:

¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.

¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.

²⁰ The wild animals honour me,
the jackals and the owls,

because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.
²² "Yet you have not called on me, Jacob,
you have not wearied yourselves for me, Israel.
²³ You have not brought me sheep for burnt offerings,
nor honoured me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with grain offerings
nor wearied you with demands for incense.
²⁴ You have not bought any fragrant calamus for me,
or lavished on me the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins
and wearied me with your offenses.
²⁵ "I, even I, am he who blots out
your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more.
²⁶ Review the past for me,
let us argue the matter together;
state the case for your innocence.
²⁷ Your first father sinned;
those I sent to teach you rebelled against me.
²⁸ So I disgraced the dignitaries of your temple;
I consigned Jacob to destruction
and Israel to scorn.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 25:1-9

¹ In you, LORD my God,
I put my trust.
² I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
³ No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.
⁴ Show me your ways, LORD,
teach me your paths.
⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Saviour,
and my hope is in you all day long.
⁶ Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.

⁷ Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, LORD, are good.

⁸ Good and upright is the LORD;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.

⁹ He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

1 Peter 3:18-end

¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at God's right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Song: Endless Hallelujah

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtzAciGlgKE>

Gospel Reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark. Glory to you, O Lord.

Mark 2:1-12

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. ² They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. ³ Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. ⁴ Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. ⁵ When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

⁶ Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, ⁷ "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

⁸ Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? ⁹ Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? ¹⁰ But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, ¹¹ "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." ¹² He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

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

Sermon

I love this incident in Mark's Gospel.
Jesus has such a crowd round him.
The place is full to bursting.
Wouldn't we like to see St James that full!

But these guys with their sick friend are not going to be put off.
They can't get through the door, so they open up the roof instead.
Jesus is impressed.
He heals their friend – **and** puts one over on the teachers of the law.
It's all great stuff.

I do wonder about the roof, though.
I just hope it got mended afterwards.

But I'll come back to the paralysed man a little later.
It is worth our thinking about what Isaiah says.

So let's remind ourselves.
Isaiah was writing in the last years of the Kingdom of Judah.
We know he was active during the reign of Hezekiah.
That's around 700 years before Jesus was born.

But this section of his writing is looking ahead, a hundred years or more.
The kingdom of Judah is no more.
Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, has captured Jerusalem.
He has carried off many of the Jews to Babylon.
It is a hard time for them, in exile.

And Isaiah is thinking about the time to come,
when God's people will be rescued from that exile.

Do you feel a bit like an exile, at the moment?
I don't want in any way to minimise the difficulties of people
who have to flee their home country.
There are far too many places in this world
where people can't feel safe in their own homes.
And, like Joseph & Mary, after Jesus was born,
sometimes they have to seek refuge in another land.
It is a disgrace on humanity, that our world should be like that.

But I do feel **something** of an exile, just now.
We are cut off from so much of what we think of as ordinary life.
It is not just being unable to meet together for worship.
We can't even give folk a hug when we see them.
We can't get close enough for a proper conversation.

So I think we can understand **something** of how the Jews will have felt,
when they were exiles in Babylon.

So, what is God saying through Isaiah, to people in exile?
First is this: God's people won't be out in the cold for ever.
God does new things.

He rescues from exile.

I know that several of us are involved, this Lent,
in studying the book "*Living his Story.*"

The Archbishop of Canterbury has written the Foreword for the book.

He talks about the pandemic, as being in the wilderness, for an extended period of time.

And I think he is right.

Many folk will feel that they are in a wilderness.

But God can make even the wilderness fruitful.

It won't be a trackless desert.

There will be a way, there will be streams of water.

The Bible says this sort of thing, time and again.

God "turns a desert into pools of water", we read in the Psalms.

"The desert shall rejoice and blossom", Isaiah says elsewhere.

"When the poor and needy seek water, ... I the LORD will answer them ...

"I will make the wilderness a pool of water."

God brings life to the desert places.

We know that, after the Jews were exiled, many of them eventually returned to Judea.

They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem; they rebuilt the Temple.

Read all about it, in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, in our Bibles.

But God's purpose isn't **always** to restore to what things were before.

Sometimes, God will rescue us from the exile, from the desert, by making the desert blossom.

Instead of taking us back to where we think the life is, he brings life to us.

"I provide water in the wilderness," he says, "to give drink to my chosen people".

If the pandemic means we are in the wilderness now;

if it means that we are in a sort of exile,

we can hope for it to be over.

The spread of vaccination, the fall in the number of infections – they give us cause for hope.

But our hope is not simply for everything to be restored to what it was before.

Of course, I want these restrictions to be withdrawn.

As soon as we can, I want to sing again.

Come the summer, I want to go and watch some cricket.

But the world had plenty of problems, before the pandemic started.

And **just** going back to how we were isn't the answer.

No, our hope is in the God who does a new thing.

Who does it **now**.

He is the God who can make wonderful things happen, even in the desert,
even in the midst of the pandemic.

So be alert for what God is doing now.

Maybe in those conversations we can have – whether on the phone,

or when we meet someone outdoors.

God wants to be in on those conversations.

To bring refreshment in the desert.

And why?

So that God's people may proclaim his praise.

We can't **sing** his praises, just yet.

But we can proclaim them.

In our lives, in those conversations, we can proclaim God's praise –
just by sharing what God has done for us.

There is a challenge for us.

And perhaps reading that book I mentioned, "*Living his Story*", will help us.

And, when the pandemic is indeed over, God will be doing yet more new things.
He will have new things for us to discover, even more new experiences to share.
We can't just put the clock back.

But back to our passage.

Isaiah has more for us.

There is a great big BUT to point out.

God has a bone to pick with his people.

"You haven't called on **me**, you haven't wearied yourselves for **me**," he says.

Worship, in exile, would be difficult.

When the Jews were in Babylon, they hadn't got the Temple to visit.

So the usual pattern of worship couldn't happen.

Sounds a familiar situation.

Our usual worship can't happen, just now.

But the Jews weren't really trying.

They weren't seeking God with their whole heart.

"You shall love the LORD your God with **all your heart**", says Deuteronomy.

But they **didn't**.

They weren't honouring God as they could, as they **should**.

They weren't being sincere, they weren't being honest,
with God or with themselves.

Instead, God says they have burdened him with their sins.

Isaiah doesn't tell us here, how the people were going astray.

Sin isn't a popular word these days.

But **anything** which doesn't put God first is sin.

Whatever we let take God's place, that is sin.

How does that fit with us?

What is there in our lives, which is taking God's place?

Whatever we allow to take God's place, that is sin.

And then Isaiah has another BUT.

God wants to do wonderful things; but his people have failed him.

They don't deserve any of it.

How can this problem be solved?

Out of nowhere, suddenly Isaiah brings us the answer.

God speaks again.

"I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake,
and remembers your sins no more."

"Yes, you have failed me," God says.

"You have let me down."

“But I am still the God who forgives.
“I’m ready to forget your sins.
“I want to go on loving you.
“I want to restore our relationship.”

This is our amazing, merciful, forgiving God.
The Bible shows us his mercy, his steadfast love, on page after page.
In our Psalm, the writer trusts in God’s mercy:
“May you have mercy on me, LORD”, he says.

Our big problem is not the state of this world.
The pandemic is big; but it isn’t mankind’s biggest problem.
Our problem is **our sin** – because each of us has messed up.
Lent is a good time to remind ourselves about that.
It is good to remember that each of us needs God’s mercy.
But – God is steadfast in mercy.
Praise be to him!
“I am he who blots out your transgressions”, he says.

And this is what Jesus demonstrates, in our Gospel passage.
Those guys bringing the paralysed man to Jesus know their friend needs help.
But Jesus doesn’t talk to **them**.

You know the syndrome, don’t you?
If someone is in a wheelchair, you ask the person pushing the chair: “Does he take sugar?”

None of that, for Jesus.
He doesn’t ask the **friends** “What can I do for your mate?”
When Jesus sees this chap lying on the mat, he speaks directly to **him**.
This paralysed man matters to Jesus: he cares, he loves.

Sometimes, when Jesus encountered sick people, he just healed their body.
But Jesus came to do more than that.
So He says to the man “Your sins are forgiven.”

Yes, the chap gets healed as well.
But, first, his sins are forgiven.

He needs love and forgiveness, more even than healing of his body.
And Jesus speaks to that need.

Now we are 2,000 years on.
But the need is the same.
Our world needs God’s love.
It needs God’s forgiveness.
We need God’s love, his forgiveness.

Yes, the need is the same.
But God is the same, too.
As Paul points out in our reading from 2 Corinthians, “God is faithful”.
God’s promises are always fulfilled.
And, for everyone who receives him, there is this promise, too:
he gives us his Holy Spirit, as a down-payment,
a guarantee of all the blessings he has for us in the future.

So don't lose heart.
The desert will blossom.
Our God does new and wonderful things.

He wants to do those things in us, and in our world.
And he is faithful.
This is good news.
Good news for us.
And it's good news for sharing with our neighbours.
And, when we do that, we honour God's name, we proclaim his praise.

Now there is a challenge.
By God's grace, may we rise to it!

Amen.

Timothy

Affirmation of Faith

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor,
sight to the blind,
freedom to captives
and salvation to your people:
anoint us with your Spirit;
rouse us to work in his name.

Father, by your Spirit

bring in your kingdom.

Send us to bring help to the poor
and freedom to the oppressed.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to tell the world
the good news of your healing love.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to those who mourn,
to bring joy and gladness instead of grief.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to proclaim that the time is here
for you to save your people.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

God of mercy,
**you know us and love us
and hear our prayer:
keep us in the eternal fellowship of
Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.**

The Peace

Christ is our peace.
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.
The old has passed away: behold, everything has become new.

May the peace of the Lord be always with us and all those we love.

Song: On Jordan's bank

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plr21ILgFpg>

An act of Spiritual Communion

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.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

Lord, in these days of mercy,
make us quiet and prayerful;
in these days of challenge,
make us stronger in you;
in these days of emptiness,
take possession of us;
in these days of waiting,
open our hearts to the mystery of your cross.

Song: Our God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Yj7H-eSiM>

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water
welling up to eternal life,
perfect in you the image of his glory;
and the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.

The Dismissal

To God the Father, who loved us,
and made us accepted in the Beloved:
to God the Son, who loved us,
and loosed us from our sins by his own blood:
to God the Holy Spirit,
who spreads the love of God abroad in our hearts:
to the one true God be all love and all glory
for time and for eternity.
Amen.