



21st March 2021
5th 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: Lift high the cross

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ephp3TVkPVY>

Prayers of Penitence

The sacrifice of God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart God will not despise.
Let us come to the Lord, who is full of compassion,
and acknowledge our transgressions in penitence and faith.

We confess to you our selfishness and lack of love:
fill us with your Spirit.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

We confess to you our fear and failure in sharing our faith:
fill us with your Spirit.
Christ, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.

We confess to you our stubbornness and lack of trust:
fill us with your Spirit.
Lord, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

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

Gracious Father,
you gave up your Son
out of love for the world:
lead us to ponder the mysteries of his passion,
that we may know eternal peace
through the shedding of our Saviour's blood,
Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

The Liturgy of the Word

Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹ "The days are coming," declares the LORD,
"when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

³² It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,"
declares the LORD.

³³ "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,"

declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more." *This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 51:1-13

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

² Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict

and justified when you judge.

⁵ Surely I was sinful at birth,
sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

⁶ Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
you taught me wisdom in that secret place.

⁷ Cleanse me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins
and blot out all my iniquity.

¹⁰ Create in me a pure heart, O God,
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

¹¹ Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.

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

Hebrews 5:5-10

⁵ In the same way, Christ did not take on himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him,

‘You are my Son;
today I have become your Father.’

⁶ And he says in another place,

‘You are a priest for ever,
in the order of Melchizedek.’

⁷ During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸ Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered ⁹ and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ¹⁰ and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.

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

Song: I will offer up my life

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWdpgXEWNx4>

Gospel Reading

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

John 12:20-33

²⁰ Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the festival. ²¹ They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. ‘Sir,’ they said, ‘we would like to see Jesus.’ ²² Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³ Jesus replied, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves me.

²⁷ 'Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name!'

Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.' ²⁹ The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him.

³⁰ Jesus said, 'This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹ Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up^l from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' ³³ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

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

Sermon

We have been journeying through Lent.
Because of the pandemic, it has been a strange Lent.
The first lock-down started just a year ago.
Now, we **seem** to be coming out at the other side.
Certainly, we hope we are!

But everything around us is still very strange.
Sometimes it seems that we have been
 in a continuous Lent, for the whole year.
So I hope you won't mind me talking a little
 about Lent, today.

Lent is often called a "penitential season".
Solemn, even mournful.
That is why, in some traditions,
 no decorations are allowed during Lent.
No flowers – except on Mothering Sunday.

But this is Spring.
Yesterday was officially the Spring Equinox.
We have much to celebrate.
And not just because the daylight is getting longer.

Penitence sounds very dismal, much like hard work.
But someone I came across said this, about penitence:
 "Our penitence is not the penitence of those who have no hope of forgiveness,
 but of those who have been redeemed by the dying and rising of Jesus the Lord."^[1]

Yes, we have a great deal to celebrate.
Easter is coming.
We may still be restricted, in our public worship.
But we will mark Good Friday.
We will celebrate Easter Day.

This great festival of our faith, when we are “redeemed by the dying and rising of Jesus the Lord.”

So, how do our Bible readings this morning help us,
in our journey through Lent, to Easter?

Our reading from John’s Gospel looks ahead to Jesus’ death.
Jesus is talking about how he was to die.
He was to be lifted up, on the cross.

The writer to the Hebrews looks at Jesus’ agony
in the garden of Gethsemane.
That time when he prayed so desperately;
and his Father gave him the strength to go on,
to face death at the hands of the Romans.

But the verses from Hebrews look beyond that, too.
“Once (Jesus was) made perfect,” he says,
“he became the source of eternal salvation
for all who obey him”.

Now that **sounds** as if there was a time
when Jesus wasn’t perfect.
I’m sure the author doesn’t mean that.
Rather, that Jesus completed his work
of bringing salvation to humankind.
And he did that by dying on the cross for us
– and then rising to new life on Easter morning.

But I think it is worth our looking a bit more at what it means,
to bring salvation to humankind.
And this is where our passage from Jeremiah comes in.

Jeremiah lived around 600 years before Jesus was born.
In Jeremiah’s time, the kingdom of Judah was threatened by various foreign powers.
Assyria, Babylon and Egypt all wanted a piece of the action.
Judah was a small, weak nation.
No match for these foreign powers.

In the time of David and Solomon,
God’s people had been a really strong nation.
But those days have gone.
God’s people have been unfaithful to him.
In the time of Moses, long before King David,
God established a covenant with the Jewish people.
He would be their God; and they were to be his people.
They were to be different from the other nations around them.
They were to live God’s way.

But the people have broken that covenant.
They have been like an adulterous wife,
cheating on her husband.
And they are paying the price, for their disobedience.
The kingdom of Judah is over-run by the invaders.
Eventually, much of the population gets deported to Babylon.

But God doesn't give up on his people.
He goes on loving them.
And Jeremiah has this wonderful prophecy.
It's worth reading it, over and again.
It just oozes with God's love.

"The days are coming, declares the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant."
Not like the old covenant.
The people have broken that one.
They have been unfaithful.

The problem was that the old covenant was rather external.
It depended on rituals; on sacrificing all those animals.
Read all about it in the book of Leviticus.
To our 21st century minds, it can seem a bit blood-thirsty.

No, God is planning a new covenant.
This is a covenant for the heart.
"I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts."
"They will know me,
from the least of them to the greatest."

This is new.
This is radical.
God won't just be someone "out there",
remote – and easy enough to ignore.
God is planning a new relationship.

His people will know him.
There will be an intimacy with God.
This will be nothing like the old covenant.
God offers a one-to-one relationship.
No good saying "I'm part of the church community."
That won't count for anything.

What counts will be knowing God.
Knowing him – and God knowing us.

And this is what God is promising,
in this new covenant.
We can all know God.
Knowing God isn't just for those priests,
who used to offer all the sacrifices.
It's not restricted just to the Jews.

Because this is about what Jesus has done.
And Jesus says he will draw **all people** to himself.
The opportunity of knowing God is for **everyone**.
As the writer to the Hebrews puts it,
Jesus "became the source of eternal salvation
for **all** who obey him".

Now that word “salvation” isn’t much used in our society,
unless it is West Bromwich getting the vital three
points they need, to avoid getting relegated.

Or what about “sin”?

If you ask someone at random to identify something “sinful”,
the answer you get, as likely as not,
will be a rather fattening choc ice.

In our Psalm, David talked a lot about sin;
but that just wouldn’t mean anything to most folk.

God promised through Jeremiah:

“I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

That promise still holds good.

And our world needs so desperately to hear that promise.

But, if “sin” and “salvation” are words which don’t mean much to people,
perhaps we need to **start** with something different.

Ian was talking last week about bringing hope and encouragement to our community.

Even though people think the church isn’t for them.

God doesn’t give up on people, so neither should we.

Through Jeremiah,

God promised to turn people’s lives around.

And he still does that.

This is good news!

This is what we have to offer our community.

Getting alongside people.

Showing that they matter.

Because ultimately they matter to God.

This is good news!

Each of us matters enough,

that Jesus came to die for us,

to purchase salvation for us.

This is why he was lifted up on the cross.

Each person on this earth matters to God,

Remember those Greeks who said

“We would like to see Jesus.”

I wonder what they thought of Jesus,

when they met him.

If people today are curious, they will look at us.

What will they think of Jesus, when they see us?

Do they see people who know the Lord?

Do they see people with God’s law written on our hearts?

That sounds like a lot of church jargon.

So let me put it this way – and quote Jeremiah again.

“I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

This is the God of welcome.

The God who offers a safe place

A place for fresh starts, for new beginnings.

That is love, in practice.

This is what God wants us to be, as the church.
This is what it means to be the Easter people.
A community where folk can come to know God,
through his people.

Now there is a challenge for us!

Amen.

Timothy

^[1] Leonel L. Mitchell, *Praying Shapes Believing: A Theological Commentary on The Book of Common Prayer* (Morehouse Publishing, 1985), p. 29.

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: How great is our God

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wDqmJFw6F64>

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.

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.

Song: There's a wideness in Gods mercy
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJwfT3SY_PU

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.

The Blessing
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUYjP4V5SJc>