**21st February 2021**

Come together to be God’s people.  
Come together and be yourselves.  
Bring to God your joys and your struggles.  
Bring to God your hopes and your fears.  
Come together to be God’s people,  
and let us worship the living God.



[A prayer of adoration](javascript:void(0))

Loving, faithful God,  
your love is absolute,  
your promises irrevocable.  
We look up after a shower of rain,  
marvelling at the colourful  
beauty of your rainbow –  
a reminder of your promise  
and faithfulness to all generations.  
Wherever we happen to be –  
wilderness, mountain or valley bottom –  
your Holy Spirit is with us.  
We adore you, loving, faithful God.  
Amen.



[Prayers of penitence](javascript:void(0))

A prayer of confession

Beloved Lord Jesus, you stepped from water to wilderness,  
from God’s voice to the taunting voice of the enemy. In the wilderness of today’s world, we face many enemies, many temptations. Forgive us for succumbing to selfishness, greed, lust, anger, power.  
Lord most high, forgive us, we pray.

Sometimes difficult times follow fast on the heels of one  
another. And it’s hard to keep our focus on you. Forgive us.  
Help us not to wallow in selfish self-centredness,  
but to remember your promises and recognise you in those you bring alongside.  
Lord most high, forgive us, we pray.

Forgive us when our minds fail to focus on you and your  
word. Help us to remember that no matter what we’re  
going through, you’ve been there before us. Whether we’re swimming in the warm waters of your love, or journeying through the arid wilderness, help us not to lose sight of your hand guiding us to eternal glory at rainbow’s end.  
Lord most high, forgive us, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

Lord Jesus Christ, you went from water to wilderness to  
suffering on the cross. There you, beloved Son of God, died in your physical body for our sins. Through your blood we are washed clean of all our guilt. And we are able to enter the presence of God with whom you now sit, having been raised in the Spirit. All angels, power and authorities submit to you.  
Because of you, we are forgiven.  
Praise be to Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

**Mark 1.9-15**

The first Sunday in Lent always has the gospel reading of Jesus in the wilderness being tested and tempted.

Has the term ‘wilderness’ ever felt as relevant to our lives as it does right now? [[1]](#endnote-1) writes Becky May. With each day and week that passes comes a series of new announcements, promises, scientific perspectives and change of guidelines that seem to drive us to a new land, different from the past and not the place where we may choose to go. On Monday 22 February, we expect the Prime Minister to share his ‘roadmap’ laying out what steps we can expect over the next few weeks and months. For our young people, they wait particularly for news of when each year group may expect to return to school, when they may be able to pick up social activities again, and when they may be able to see grandparents, for instance.

As Jesus was driven out into the wilderness, he did so knowing that he was God’s beloved Son. This truth, deep in his being, prepared him to face whatever lay before him in the wilderness. For us, sharing in this truth, that we are known and loved by God is the truth that can sustain us, whatever we may face. As we are driven to a ‘wilderness’ alien from our norm and as we may be cut off from our usual places, practices, and people, knowing this truth deep in our being, gives us a hope that passes all understanding, and will carry us through the wilderness of today’s world.

Mark is very brief in his account of the wilderness.

*2At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted(or the Greek word can also mean Tested) by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. Mark 1.12-13*

Wild animals and angels.

Maybe we have had to face some wild beasts during this pandemic. Maybe we have also experienced the ministry of angels.

It has been a testing time. Last weekend was Valentine’s Day, and it shone a light on relationships. Most people’s relationships have been tested over the last year. Holed up in solitary confinement for such a long time can expose the apparent harmony of most relationships.

When I do marriage preparation courses, I look at how couples deal with conflict. I ask them whether they are flighters or fighters. I suggest there are basically two ways of reacting to conflict: FIGHT or FLIGHT, i.e., attack or retreat, enjoy it or avoid it. In dealing with conflict, it helps to recognise which way people react – which way we react. You need the fighters because they will try and tackle the problem, they will bring the issue to a head. They are concerned about the lack of peace in the relationship and so they will make the first move to try and get the issue resolved.

In the gospel reading Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to confront Satan. The word in Greek for ‘drove’, ekballei, means ‘with a very strong force, compulsion’. Matthew and Luke in their account of Jesus going into the wilderness to confront Satan, use a less forceful word which is translated ‘led’ – the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness. Mark presents a picture of Jesus as a man of action, a man who is not afraid of facing conflict and confronting sin and evil in the world. Jesus is no wimp in a nightie in Mark’s description. He’s a fighter.

Well, are we fighters or flighters? Few people go looking for conflict, but the world we live in, conflict inevitably comes looking for us. When we are caught up in it, do we face conflict or do we run away from it.

We all have feelings, some people are very aware of them, others keep them pushed down out of the way and may not even be very aware of them. Yet it is not healthy to keep negative feelings buried, for instance anger can lead to depression and even physical illness. Unexpressed anger can suddenly be triggered off by some unsuspecting person and be released in inappropriate ways. Therefore, it is important to recognise negative feelings and be honest about them and then find good and safe ways of expressing them. The same could be said about anger at the injustice in the world. Do something constructive: campaign, support a cause or project that makes a difference.

Conflict is normal and inevitable in any close relationship and, when handled well, is one way of growing closer. We fear it can be destructive, and therefore frightening. But it doesn’t have to be. The time of testing can refine relationships and bring them closer, working differently and better. Testing can be good news.

Who are our enemies? Who are the wild animals? It is a profound question. If you have paranoid leanings you may think that everyone is out to get you. The gas companies want to charge you as much as they can get away with. The government always want more tax. Facebook are manipulating you with their algorithms. Your next-door neighbour plays their music deliberately loud to annoy you. Your boss at work, reading, as you do between the lines, seems to have got it in for you. The whole of life may seem against us. Even God.

Perhaps we’re not that paranoid, but there are times when we may feel nothing is going right. We may have internal conflicts about who we are and who we want to be. Guilt, anger, jealousy, lust, envy, greed, may all be at war in our inner being.

Our enemies may be other people. People we don’t get on with, who have disagreements with us or are downright malicious towards us. Those who have hurt us, those who we have hurt.

The enemy can also be the systems we live under. Structural violence in our society and our world can keep some people oppressed or trapped in poverty. Unfair trading systems in the world disadvantage poorer countries. Fair-trade Fortnight reminds us that just buying a jar of coffee is political – there are deep issues at stake, a conflict of interests and a fight for justice.

Nearly two-thirds of people in the UK say they do not want rich countries to get priority access to Covid-19 vaccinations over poorer countries amid warnings that a huge swathe of the world is yet to administer a single dose of the life-saving jab.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Two-thirds of people questioned also said the UK government should press pharmaceutical companies to share their Covid vaccine formula to allow doses to be rolled out faster.

The poll, commissioned by Christian Aid, comes as the [World Health Organization](https://www.theguardian.com/world/world-health-organization) (WHO) and the United Nations’ children’s agency said that 10 countries accounted for three-quarters of the 128 million vaccine doses administered worldwide by the middle of last week. Almost 130 countries with a population totalling 2.5 billion had yet to vaccinate anyone, they said.

Boris Johnson on Friday pledged to donate most of the UK's surplus vaccine supply to poorer countries in a speech to a virtual G7 meeting[[3]](#endnote-3).

There are spiritual enemies. We live in the conflict, or spiritual battlefield, between good and evil.

Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Some see Satan, or the devil, as a personal being. Others see him as the personification of evil forces that come about when human beings worship that which is not God. When people do this, they give authority to forces of destruction and malevolence; value systems, such as sexism or racism or values that influence people but destroy them rather than build them up. When those forces gain a power, collectively, it has, down the centuries of Christian experience, caused people to personify it, to give it the name of Satan, the Accuser, or the Devil. Either approach acknowledges the reality of evil in the world and how it may affect us.

We are constantly tested as Christians by our secular and skeptical society who are largely indifferent to our faith in God and at times hostile to it. We live with the attacks of doubt and ridicule, that there is no God, never mind that God is love and loves us.

In the Psalm for today (Psalm 25) the psalmist starts to wonder whether God will look after him. Faced with opposition, enemies and the possibility of shame and defeat he starts to ask God to remember him, to make your paths known to me, to remember that you God are supposed to be caring and loving and that no one who hopes in you will be put to shame. Caught up in conflict and temptation we can wonder whether God is on our side?

Back in Mark’s Gospel, there is the revelation of Jesus' true identity at his baptism. The heavens being 'torn apart' symbolise the end of feeling God is distanced from everyday life, and the beginning of a new way between heaven and earth – through Jesus. The Spirit descending on Jesus 'like a dove' and the voice saying ‘this is my beloved Son’

But then Jesus is taken into the desert where he overcomes testing by Satan. Again, we see how being in a covenant with God, being loved by God, does not free the believer from suffering. Once we have committed ourselves to the covenant through baptism our lives may become more complicated. Either we become more conscious of evil in the world or we are led by God to confront evil and defeat it.

The passage ends with John the Baptist's arrest and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry which will be short and full of conflict and suffering as he reaches out to those who are excluded by his society, as he opposes religious hypocrisy, as he confronts the sin and injustice in the world at various levels and as he reveals a model of service that threatens those in power.

Christian discipleship is not a safe haven for those who want to run from responsibility. Signing up to God's covenant engages the believer in the life of the world at a deeper level. God constantly challenges our understanding of his love in a world that seems beautiful and blessed yet full of contradictions.

To overcome the conflicts in our lives, Christians benefit from times of silence, stillness, aloneness, prayer, and contemplation. Lent is a time when we are encouraged to engage in this aspect of our spiritual life, never mind giving up chocolate or going for a run every day! Psalm 25 starts by lifting up the soul to God. Whatever our enemies are, the way to deal with them is by prayer first of all. Asking God’s strength and guidance. Meditating on the way of Christ in this situation.

In the gospel reading Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to confront Satan. Where are we being driven at the moment. Where is the Spirit prompting us, pushing us to take action?

Jesus overcame. Mark describes, enigmatically how angels attended to his needs. We have seen the face of angels in our neighbours, in our health workers, in our delivery drivers, in our supermarket workers, in the volunteers who have shopped and listened and helped. In the generosity of friends, the government, the churches. God has been at work in our conflicts. There have been wild beasts but also ministering angels.

‘Beloved Son’ is a title for Jesus here at the beginning of Mark’s Gospel, at the transfiguration in the middle (9.7) and, by implication, in the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard (Mark 12.6) as his passion nears. It is because Jesus knows himself loved by the Father that he in turn is able to set love free – both among other human beings and in wider creation.

I enjoy the paintings of Stanley Spencer. His collection of paintings entitled ‘Christ in the wilderness’ is drawn from this gospel story. One of the most  famous (and my favourite) of these is [Christ tenderly holding a scorpion](https://www.wikiart.org/en/stanley-spencer/christ-in-the-wilderness-the-scorpion), an example of his time with ‘the wild beasts’ (Mark 1.13). Because Jesus is secure in his own identity, he is able to extend love to others, even those creatures normally seen as hostile.

*Henri Nouwen said* Love for neighbour is a movement from hostility to hospitality.

*The Christian mystic, (Julian of Norwich, famously said: ‘*Because of our good Lord’s tender love to all those who shall be saved, he quickly comforts them, saying, ‘The cause of all this pain is sin. But all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ [[4]](#endnote-4)

You are loved by God. May that knowledge sustain you through all the trials and temptations in life, through the wilderness. Love the wild beasts and be aware of the angels sent to protect you and sustain you.

Then when you come through, proclaim the good news of the rule of God’s love and encourage others to change and believe that they too are loved and can know the love of God through the work of the Spirit.

[Prayers of intercession](javascript:void(0))

As we walk into the long weeks of Lent,  
we begin a journey into the wilderness:  
may your Spirit rest upon us.  
We travel from suffering to hope:  
may your Spirit rest upon us  
We travel through death to new life:  
may your Spirit rest upon us.  
As we look to the example of Jesus,  
who in the wilderness chose the difficult path,  
help us to know that you are with us –  
though the way ahead may be hard and we so often falter and fail.  
strengthen us for the journey ahead,  
and teach us to trust in you.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it

We walk in relative security,  
thankful for the comforts we know.  
We pray for people who cannot afford to work from home  
and ask that we would address the inequality this shows us.  
We pray for people in homes that are insecure  
and for people living in life threatening icy weather in central and southern US.  
We give thanks for the peace we experience,  
and ask that our church communities  
can offer hope and safety for those in distress.  
May we share what we have,  
and work to lift the burden that others carry.  
As we look to the example of Jesus,  
who embraced all who were in pain,  
may we reach out to others in generosity and kindness.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it

We walk in our troubled world,  
full of anxiety at the conflict we see -  
in Iraq, in Iran, in the Sahel region,  
in Myanmar, Somalia and in Yemen:  
bring your peace we pray.  
We are aware of the finite resources of our earth:  
may we limit our destructive habits.  
As we look to the example of Jesus,  
who lived in simplicity and trust,  
and as we are asked again to follow him;  
may we free ourselves from all that holds us back,  
and trust in your promise that you will never leave us,

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name;your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it

We walk in separation,  
apart from friends and those we love:  
give us strength to endure in hope.  
We pray especially for all who are burdened by loneliness;  
for all who are in pain; for the bereaved and the despairing; the sick and the dying: may we work to make our communities places of warmth and friendship where all are included and each one finds a place.  
As we look to the example of Jesus,  
who welcomed the least and the lost  
and brought the overlooked into the light,  
may we extend our circle of belonging  
and believe that you love is big enough for all to enter in.  
                 
Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name;  
your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it

We walk in hope for a future  
as the rollout of the vaccine continues across the UK,  
and there are signs of success in the data as death rates among over 80s fall.  
We give thanks for the work of the NHS as they administer vaccines to the public and manage long lists of people needing urgent surgery.  
May we be mindful of countries yet to begin vaccination,  
and countries who cannot afford the vaccines, and we ask that governments would enable fair distribution.  
When we begin to emerge from crisis, may we work to build a better world where the poorest are protected.  
As we look to the example of Jesus,  
who placed such great value on children,  
may we create a space where the young can dream again,  
and all of us can grow, rest and be secure.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it

In love you made us;  
in love you call us;  
in love you lead us –  
through this world,  
through sorrow and joy,  
until we see you face to face.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.  
Teach us to walk in it. Amen.

[A sending out prayer](javascript:void(0))

Creator God, you made us in your image  
to be your people, wherever we go.  
This coming week, whatever we experience,  
wherever we find ourselves,  
help us to know that you are with us –  
guiding, revealing and sustaining – always.  
Amen.

1. Becky May https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/111-january-february-2021-b/lent-1/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/14/two-thirds-of-britons-do-not-want-rich-countries-to-have-vaccine-priority [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-56117120 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Clare Amos https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/111-january-february-2021-b/lent-1/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-4)