



Opening Prayer for Lent (Cranmer's *Collect for Purity*)

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open, all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden;
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts,
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

Have you ever experienced a wilderness period within your life, and if so, what sustained you in the midst of that time?

Psalm of the Week – Psalm 32:1 – 7

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
**Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**
While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
**For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**
Then I acknowledged my sin to you,

and did not hide my iniquity;
**I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord',
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you;
**at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.**

You are a hiding-place for me; you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

Jesus told his disciples that if they wanted to follow him,
they needed to deny themselves, and take up their crosses.
God calls us into that same movement
of dying to sin and rising again with Christ.

In this quiet space for reflection,
let us bring to God those things in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
have mercy upon us.

Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world;
grant us peace.

God of our journeys and false starts and new beginnings,
you walk with us all of our days,

and nothing in life or death or all creation
can separate us from your love in Jesus Christ.
Thank you that you forgive us our faults and mistakes,
share with us in our worries and struggles,
and lead us onwards into fullness of life.
We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus. **Amen**

Reading Matthew 4:1 – 11

Sermon

I wonder if you have ever found yourself stood on a border between two distinct regions, with your left foot planted in one area, and your right foot in the other? Sally and I did this, when we visited the Royal Observatory at Greenwich and stood with one foot on either side of the Meridian Line. In such moments, it is not clear where we actually stand – we simultaneously straddle both the possibilities open to us and thus exist with a necessary degree of ambiguity. Now, this may be resolved straightforwardly enough when it comes to the physical boundary or border of which the Meridian Line is an example, as we can choose to move fully onto one side or another. However, things are not always as easy or as neat as that...

Classically, when it comes to the subject of sin, the spotlight is upon our need to recognise those ways in which our thoughts, words and deeds fall short of that calling to fullness of life Christ came to bring, and to repent in the light of God's forgiveness. Thus, we offer prayer of confession or renewal, aware that we might only do this *precisely because* of the redemption brought about by Jesus's life, death and resurrection. However, this isn't the whole story. As much as we are sinners, we are also those who have – to a greater or lesser degree – been sinned against at some point within our lives. To be a human being is to live with one foot rooted on each side of this 'border', and as such, where we actually stand isn't always clear-cut. As we begin

our Lenten journeys, we're therefore invited to make time and space to grapple with this complicated and messy reality, starting with this well-known account of Jesus in the wilderness.

The story of Jesus's temptations and testing is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. In each case, these events follow on from Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, the same river the Israelites once crossed to enter the Promised Land. He was declared to be God's beloved Son with whom God was well-pleased. As we explore Matthew's version of the story, we also need to keep in mind that we began this Gospel with Jesus's genealogy, which reminds us that as well as being truly divine, he was fully human. Immediately after his baptism and all its affirmation and encouragement, the Holy Spirit took him out into the wilderness for a prolonged period (which is what is meant when the Bible speaks of 'forty days') to discover what God would demand of him. Not surprisingly, Jesus needed the space to prepare for public ministry, and the room to wrestle with what embodying the vocation of God's people meant. The parallels with Moses's taking forty days to write the covenant for Israel (Exodus 34:27 – 28), and the people experiencing four decades of wilderness wandering before entering the Land aren't accidental. In both situations, the pitfalls of distortion and seduction were very real, and needed to be faced down through testing, challenge and growth.

The time Jesus was in the wilderness was therefore crucial. As Tom Wright describes those events, the story does not actually envisage Jesus in conversation with a visible figure; the Devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas, inside his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make a lot of sense. God would not want his beloved Son to be famished with hunger, so why not turn stones into bread? If God wanted Jesus to become sovereign over the world, then why not do so in one easy stride? If Jesus really is Israel's Messiah, then why not prove it with a spectacular display of divine power? It would have been all too easy to succumb to the seductive allure of Satan's

whispering in his ear, encouraging self-indulgent, self-aggrandising, and self-serving actions. Yet, if he failed to act with integrity here, in the arena of his own heart, then there wouldn't have been any point in carrying on. Consequently, Jesus needed to focus on what really mattered, so that when he faced down the distractions of praise and criticism, and in particular when the shadow of the cross loomed all too ominously on the horizon, he might remain faithful to God.

So, what does this mean for us today? Well, during these forty days and nights, we're invited to take the risk of opening ourselves up to the love of God. On the one hand, this may feel like being refined in the fire. After all, God's love shines an unflinching light on us as we really are, and that is a very uncomfortable place to stand! However, God's motive is not to burden us with distorting criticism, just as God isn't looking to seduce us with a falsely positive image of ourselves; this is a time for *honest reflection* on ourselves and our motivations. Moreover, Lent can also be a *healing time*, as God invites us to take the risk being vulnerable, so that those parts of ourselves damaged through our being sinned against may gradually be made whole. In short, the goal of Lent is growing more fully into the person that God has created us to be, reflecting the Christlike image of the God who knows us better than we know ourselves, and loves us more deeply and completely than we could possibly imagine. Thus, whichever of the two sides of the border we stand on at a given time, God is with us, and will always remain faithful and true.

So, let us pray that during this Lenten season, we might be prepared to encounter the living God and see the truth of ourselves more fully – the good to be rejoiced in, the bad to be amended and the hurt to be lovingly tended. After all, this is what it means to live authentically and abundantly so that, through us, the wider world can glimpse the love of God and be changed forever. Amen

Space for Quiet Reflection

Spiritual Exercise of the Week

Take time to reflect on what you might give up or take up during this season of Lent and make a commitment – to yourself and to God – to follow this through.

Prayers of Intercession

God of costly and self-giving love,
as we journey onwards towards the cross of Christ
and seek transformation for ourselves, and for your world,
we bring our prayers for others to you.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for those places and people beset by conflict,
especially those in Ukraine, Syria, the Yemen and Myanmar.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all victims of natural disasters across the world,
and all those who are unwell in mind, body or spirit.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who have lost livelihoods and businesses,
and all who have been made homeless during this period.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who work in our emergency services,
those in the NHS and social care, and for all key workers.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who struggle with temptation or addiction,
and for all who are isolated, lonely, or despairing.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for the Church throughout the world,
that we would be open to interruptions and new insights.
God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

In a time of quiet and stillness,
we bring the people and situations on our hearts to you...

Lord's Prayer

Final Prayer – Collect for the First Sunday of Lent

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ
fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin:
give us grace to discipline ourselves
in obedience to your Spirit;
and, as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Blessing

As you journey onwards in God's love,
towards the foot of the cross of Christ,
may you step forward boldly and act justly,
so that through you, all may know that they matter.
And the blessing of God,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be upon you, and all whom you love and pray for,
now and for ever. **Amen**