



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 25:1 – 10

Prayers of Renewal

Let us pray:

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 Mark 1:9 – 15

Sermon

In his famous poem, Rudyard Kipling reflects upon the need to meet with both triumph and disaster, and treat those imposters the same. It's an intriguing line which invites us to ponder what we might mean by 'success' and 'failures', in our individual lives and as a part of the Body of Christ. We are all part of economies of being, which include much more than money markets and Gross Domestic Product; they are systems of the exchange of all sorts of things, in which we each participate with our bodies and our imaginations. Such systems will

shape us whether or not we consciously realise it, and hence impact profoundly on what we desire and value and worry about, what (and who) we celebrate or neglect, what we do with our bodies, and what we consider worth treasuring in our earthly lives. To start asking the critical questions emerging as we acknowledge this can risk leading us into dangerous territory, both in terms of the discomfort of honest self-examination that may well feel like being refined in the fire, and the backlashes that frequently follow even naming the 'sacred cows' that shape corporate identities and exert a power much greater than the sum of the individual people who tell the resulting stories. These economies dictate what we mean by 'success' or 'failure', and draw us into that wilderness place where today we find Jesus.

The story of Jesus's temptations and testing is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (that is, Mark, Matthew and Luke), and they each put their own twist on events. In each case, the story follows on from Jesus's baptism in the Jordan, the same river that the Israelites had to cross over to enter into the Promised Land. God declared him to be God's beloved Son with whom God was well-pleased. Before we get to the temptations in Luke's version, however, we first encounter Jesus's genealogy, which goes back from Joseph through to Adam. After the dramatic revelation at his baptism of Jesus's divine status, Luke wants to make clear that he was also fully human. Finally, we see the Holy Spirit leading him into the wilderness. Mark's language is notably way starker than in the two later versions; the Spirit *thrust* Jesus out into the wilderness for a prolonged period (which is what's meant when the Bible speaks of 'forty days'), to find for himself what the commission given at his baptism would demand from him.

It seems that Jesus needed space and time to prepare for his public ministry, and to work out for himself what it meant to be the Messiah and Holy One of Israel. The parallels with the people of Israel being made to wander around the wilderness for forty years, following the Exodus, before crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, are

not accidental. Israel had to work out what it meant to be the people of God before they ready for the next stage of their journey with God to begin, and Jesus needed to undertake a preparation period of his own before he would be ready to embody their calling to be the Light of the World. It would be a real test of integrity and resolve, as it had been for Israel: could Jesus overcome those devices and desires of his own heart, and be fully prepared to fulfil his baptismal vocation?

In this vein, it is interesting that Mark's account of Jesus's testing in the wilderness is the briefest and comes without the layers of details we find in Matthew (4:1 – 11) and Luke (4:1 – 13); a mere two verses were enough in this earliest version of the story. We learn that Jesus was with the wild beasts, which might point to a new creation scene (see Isaiah 11:6 – 9 and the vision of wolves and lambs lying beside one another, for example) or be there to indicate that this wilderness was a threatening and dangerous space. We also know that angels tended to his needs, meaning God was with him through this ordeal. However, important as this is, if we want to truly know the nature of Jesus's wilderness experience, we need to draw upon Matthew and Luke's accounts. When we do thus, we discover that the temptation to what Al Barrett and Ruth Harley describe as "heroic power" within their insightful and challenging book, *Being Interrupted*, would have been great for him, and indeed remains so for the Church today, as we navigate our way towards a new post-pandemic future.

His first temptation, to turn stone into bread and to feed both himself and other people, is what Barrett and Harley name as "the power of the provider". We do come across instances in the Gospels of Jesus feeding others and of course this is a good thing to do. Yet, the risks here lie both in failing to notice the power dynamics which can easily seduce us into thinking that we know what is best for those we seek to feed without acknowledging any vulnerability or need of our own, and becoming addicted to the feelgood buzz that feeding others can generate. If the latter appears to be overly cynical, ask yourself why

it is that so many were happy to support lockdown initiatives to feed hungry people whilst simultaneously remaining implacably opposed to welfare reforms that would prevent food poverty arising in the first place! Our motivations easily become complex and muddled, and it matters that Jesus was anchored in his relationship with the God he always sought to point towards, was not afraid to be vulnerable, and didn't shy away from interdependency with others.

The second temptation, resulting from being invited to throw himself off from the Temple roof, was for Jesus to harness what Barrett and Harley term "the power of the performer". We live in a society where the pressure to demonstrate impact is deeply embedded – whether that is as individuals held accountable by committees, management or employing institutions, or as churches faced with the demands of being charity trustees who are required to justify that organisational status every year in our annual reporting to the Charity Commission. In response, the temptation is shout loudly about what we are doing, how 'useful' we are to wider society, and how our various gatherings and activities are essential for wellbeing or mental health or another fashionable metric. The danger here is twofold – firstly, that we take up the role of performers, and thereby place everybody else into the category of a passive audience into which we have minimal interest, and secondly that in the context of declining numbers and influence, such performance becomes an exercise in propping up our own ego and making ourselves feel better, and useful, and needed. On more than one occasion, we see people trying to force Jesus into the trap of being seduced by this form of power, to which the cross is surely the ultimate act of subversion and disarmament.

Finally, the third temptation facing Jesus was to pursue what Barrett and Harley call "the power of the possessor" by bowing down to and worshipping Satan, who within Mark's account is the personification of everything opposed to God. Think about how many disputes and conflicts come down to questions of possession, power and control,

from church politics around chair and carpet colours to endless wars over territory or access to natural resources. One of the reasons I'm less than keen these days on the language of 'inclusion' in churches these days is that it begs precisely these sorts of 'possession power' questions – who decides who is included (or excluded), and on what terms? It is surely telling that one of the most beautiful poems within the whole of the Bible emphasises the *letting go* of power, as Jesus willingly takes the role of a servant (Philippians 2:5), rather than one who grasps onto the power that comes with his divine status.

Putting this all together, then, invites us to think deeply through this season of Lent about what we mean by 'success' and 'failure' as we look to emerge from lockdown(s) in the coming months. To embrace an economy of grace looks rather different to the 'heroic power' that Jesus was tempted to embody, and with which he had to wrestle, in both private and public. It is hard to abandon ourselves to the grace that accepts us just as we are without regard for achievement or an absence thereof, yet draws us into often painful self-examination in order to free us from the tentacles of sin, and enable growth into the likeness of Christ. However, the task of the Lent season is to expose our bodies and imaginations to precisely this interrupting, disruptive and life-giving grace. If we are to walk faithfully in Jesus's footsteps, we too must brave to venture into the wilderness, at the Holy Spirit's behest, and wrestle with the demons and wild beasts we encounter there. Yet, just as Jesus was tended to by the angels and was never abandoned by God, we too do not journey alone. Hence, I pray that you're able to engage as openly as possible with Lent, knowing that even when it is hard going, you are loved. Thanks be to God! Amen

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 both to yourself, and God, to follow these things through.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray:

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 Syria, the Yemen and Myanmar.

God of hope, **in your mercy, hear us.**

We pray for all who've lost loved ones during the pandemic,
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,
in the NHS and in social care, as winter pressures continue.

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**