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# Vision Refresh Lent 2021



God  
for All

Sermon notes

# 1st Sunday of Lent 21.02.21 Introduction

## Mark 1.9-15 - The Temptation of Christ

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'*

## Sermon notes

Today is the first Sunday of Lent when traditionally we focus on Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, as a model for our own overcoming of temptations, whatever those might be.

Sometimes on the first Sunday of Lent, the lectionary reading is from Matthew or Luke, where we have a much longer account, with details of the three temptations Jesus faced and how he dealt with each one.

But this year it is Mark, with its short and stark description of Jesus, the wilderness, the wild beasts, and the angels.

Right at the start of his ministry, Jesus is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This is part of his training for ministry to come, an intense time, a time of endurance, of isolation. It's no coincidence that the word 'quarantine' literally means '40 days'.

Satan's intention was to tempt Jesus away from the mission that God had given him, to question his identity as the Son of God, and to try to divert him with offers of quick and glittering success rather than the hard task of saving the world that he had been sent by God to fulfil. So this was 'quarantine' for Jesus - alone in the wilderness with the trainer from Hell. Literally.

In the Bible, the wilderness has always been a place of encounter with God. God's people Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. Elijah spent 40 days in the wilderness and had there his most profound encounter with God.

We have become familiar with our own kind of 'testing in the wilderness' experience over the past year due to the suffering and restrictions of the Covid pandemic. Although not comparable with Jesus's desert temptations, 'isolation' has been a very real concept for many - not being able to access all the things that bring us comfort, enjoyment, consolation, life. In the

Biblical narrative the wilderness was alien and inhospitable to humans, the opposite of the sort of place where you would want to settle down or stay for any length of time. 'When will this all end?' is a cry we have heard so often during the lockdown period.

But this wilderness, we're told by Mark, although hostile to human habitation was home to other kinds of creatures - wild beasts. Mark says of Jesus that he was 'with the wild animals'.

Anyone who has read the children's book *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak knows that it's often tricky to tell whether the beasts are on your side or not. They are wild and untameable. They were not pets, of course, but Jesus doesn't seem to be threatened by them. Perhaps the wild beasts show us that mission in God's Kingdom will never be safe or predictable. There may be a rumpus. But the wild beasts can become your friends if like Jesus (and Max), you are not afraid.

Also in the wilderness, Jesus encounters angels who minister to him, as they did to Elijah when he fled to the wilderness. Even this place, devoid of comfort and all the things most necessary for human life, is not without God's provision.

So I wonder what this short and sharp description of Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness might offer to us in the way of comfort and direction this Lent? Lent is a wilderness season - a time when we are confronted with our own weaknesses but invited also to spend focussed time - alone and together - reflecting on who we are, deepening our walk with God, hearing his voice of affirmation calling us into the walk of discipleship, ministry and mission he has for each of us.

It is also a time when we are reflecting on, and launching our refreshed God for All vision: a vision "to release the whole people of God for the whole mission of God for the transformation of Cumbria in Jesus's name". Under that overarching

vision sit 4 simple themes - to follow daily, speak boldly, care deeply, and tread gently.

What might Jesus's testing in the wilderness show us about each of these?

Firstly we might notice that it was only after this time in the wilderness that Jesus began his mission of announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. My prayer through this whole Covid pandemic has been that out of this time of severe testing God might bring something new and fruitful; a new sense of purpose, a fresh sense of vocation after the stripping away. I pray that might be true of us as a diocese, as a Church of England, as a whole church of many different denominations. As we emerge from this wilderness experience we may be tempted to head off in all sorts of different directions that may be tempting, but are not God's will for us. And so we need a clear sense of vision to know how and where God is calling us to minister for him in the weeks and months ahead. That may be true of us as individuals too. What is God bringing out of this time of trial for you in terms of a new sense of direction, calling, ministry? Perhaps a new call to 'follow daily' in every day life?

**A vision 'to release the whole people of God for the whole mission of God for the transformation of Cumbria in Jesus's name' - follow daily, speak boldly, care deeply, tread gently.**

Secondly Jesus's time of testing in the wilderness might cause us to examine our relationship to the wild beasts, whether that's the metaphorical wild beasts that we are afraid might stand in the way of our being able to fulfil something for God - perhaps the wild beasts of fear, or cynicism, or

apathy. How can we learn to tame our fears, to make friends with the things that scare us most, so we can be as free as Jesus was to live out his mission the world? And how might Jesus being *with* the wild beasts cause us to think about the way we are *with* God's creation in the natural world? The bible tells us he was *with* the beasts in the same way he was *with* his disciples. Perhaps God's creation is more of a partner in mission than we ever allow ourselves to realise. As we seek to 'tread gently' in the world this Lent, perhaps we might see the natural world as a significant part of that.

And thirdly perhaps we will find reassurance that even in the most difficult times, God sent his angels to 'care deeply' for Jesus, and he does for us too. This Lent I pray that we might each and as mission communities and churches become more and more aware of God's day by day provision for us - the unobtrusive ministry of the angels. We are never alone. As a whole people of God we are called to echo the care God has for us in our care for each other, to 'care deeply' for each other and for the communities in which he places us.

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves, whose angel can I be today?

And from that point of quarantine, after his testing in the wilderness ,after his choosing to follow God, not the temptations of satan, Jesus bursts back on to the scene, fulfilling his mission, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, speaking boldly, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

That is what we are called to do too, to 'speak boldly' of all that God has shown and taught us. To speak boldly about the coming of his kingdom, a kingdom of justice, peace wholeness and flourishing for all people and the created world. Over this coming Lent let us pray that God would open our eyes and enlarge our hearts to see the

possibilities of proclaiming in the power of the Holy Spirit, the good news of his Kingdom.

## The Vision refresh prayer

Living Lord,  
as we offer to you our common life,  
refresh our vision  
that we may know your will  
and seek to follow in all your ways.  
May we follow daily as your disciples,  
care deeply for one another in community,  
speak boldly your gospel words of love,  
and tread gently as faithful stewards of your goodness.  
We ask this in the power of your holy name,  
as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives,  
today and for ever.  
Amen.

# 2nd Sunday of Lent 28.02.21

## **Mark 8.31-38 - Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection**

*Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

## **Sermon notes**

These days, (when permitted by the Covid restrictions of course), if you go to a coffee shop and simply ask for 'a coffee', apparently that's not good enough. You then get bombarded by a whole range of follow-up questions: What kind of coffee? An Espresso? Cappuccino? Macchiato? A pour over? Single origin? Blend? Small, medium or large? With milk or without? Hot milk or cold milk?

*I'd like a coffee please!*

I sometimes wonder if our approach to Jesus is a bit like our approach to buying coffee. What kind of 'Jesus' would I like today?

If I'm honest I would possibly like Jesus to be a bit more like my idea of what Jesus should be - the kind of Jesus who will be at my beck and call to make my life a little bit better, a bit easier. I'd quite like my Jesus to be some kind of superhero, who swoops down to help me out when I'm in a fix - like when I can't find a parking space, for example. I think I'd like a kindly Messiah, who understands me, but also one who can sort out all the world's problems in one go - without getting in the way of anyone's free will, of course. I'd like a Jesus that doesn't offend anyone too much and doesn't make me look too crazy, or ask me to do too many embarrassing things.



## **Follow Daily**

Jesus's disciples probably wouldn't have chosen the kind of Messiah Jesus described himself as, in today's reading:

"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again"

This Sunday, the second in Lent, we continue our series of sermons based on the refreshed vision we have agreed together as an ecumenical county "to release the whole people of God for the whole mission of God for the transformation of Cumbria in Jesus's name".

Last week we had an introduction to the 4 themes of that refreshed vision - to "follow daily, speak boldly, care deeply, tread gently" - with a reading about Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness. Today we focus in on the first of the themes - follow daily - with a reflection on Jesus foretelling his death and resurrection.

So what does this glimpse into the life of Jesus from Mark 8 show us about our theme to 'follow daily'?

Up to this point, and just before we pick up our reading for today, Jesus has been trying to get through to his disciples the not terribly welcome news that, far from being the Messiah they would probably choose - the one who would storm the gates of Jerusalem with some (hitherto unknown) army to overthrow the Roman occupation, if not quite a superhero, then close, Jesus was in fact a Messiah who was to suffer and die.

Let's think how all this must have sounded to Peter. It would be a bit like a politician who suddenly burst on the scene today and announced that he was standing in the next General Election. It doesn't matter really which party. This person announces such sensible policies, such solutions to the world's problems, talking such wisdom and sound common sense that you believe everything they are saying. This person puts forward workable solutions to the debt crisis, to the pandemic, to low-cost vaccinations for everyone, to trade deals, to the funding gap in the NHS. This new politician has the strength of character and the integrity and honesty to make you want to follow them and vote for them. This amazing new politician is all set to win a landslide victory - and then a few

months into his election campaign, they announce - "Oh and by the way I will be dead before the election happens".

How would you feel?

This was not the kind of Messiah the disciples had ordered!

So Peter - (don't we all love Peter - getting it wrong, blurting out inappropriate things, sticking his foot in it?) - has reacted strongly to all this talk by Jesus of death and dying and "took him aside and began to rebuke him". Peter dares to correct Jesus's theology! But Jesus corrects his misunderstanding, and then helps his disciples to face the reality: *'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.'*

I guess we sometimes fall into the same trap as Peter. We would like our Messiah to be strong, invincible, able to sort out all our problems with one sweep of his mighty hand.

**We will help each other to follow Jesus more closely, seeking to grow as his disciples in all aspects of life, both corporately and as individuals.**

The trouble is, when we ask for a strong and powerful God like that, we see strength in the same way as Peter did - from a human perspective, rather than a divine one. We see strength as the ability to carry out one's own will through power, and force. In the eyes of God strength looks very different. For God, strength is

measured in vulnerability, in sacrifice. Ultimately, evil won't be overcome by military or political might, but through the self-giving sacrifice of a humble saviour. Jesus came to give himself away. That's the kind of Messiah he is.

And he calls his disciples to do the same as he does: "*If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*"

This is what it means to 'follow daily.' It's hard work, but it's worth it.

The Christian writer, Tom Wright says, "Following Jesus is not an invitation to accompany him on a pleasant afternoon hike, but to go on a walk of danger and risk. ... Or did we suppose that the kingdom of God would mean merely a few minor adjustments on the way?"

I wonder what you have given up for Lent? Alcohol? Chocolate? Cake? I spoke to someone the other day who has given up alcohol, tea, coffee, chocolate and cake. That's a bit extreme!

A few years ago Pope Francis encouraged Christians to give up indifference for Lent. He said: "*Indifference to our neighbour and to God represents a real temptation for us Christians*".

Our reading today challenges us with something similar - with giving up something costly for Lent - and that something is living our lives exactly the way we would choose, and instead taking up the costly call to follow Jesus daily, rather than our own desires, preferences and securities.

Jesus challenged Peter to consider whether he *really* wanted the Messiah, or whether he wanted his own idea of the Messiah. We too are called to the same kind of reflection. Do we want to follow the Jesus superhero we would quite like, or are we willing to follow the *real* Jesus? This Messiah may not be the kind of Jesus we would have asked for by choice, a suffering one, with holes in his hands and feet, but this is the only kind of Jesus who can save us.

We have made the phrase 'carry your cross' into an everyday truism, shorthand for any kind of suffering that comes our way. But remember that when Jesus said it, it didn't yet have that slightly noble overtone. Jesus himself hadn't yet carried his own physical cross at this point. The cross was a source of shame and derision, used to torture and kill any who dared to challenge and stand up to the power of Roman rule. And so the call to take up the cross is the call to join a revolutionary movement.

Are we up for that?

Jesus's words remind us that to follow daily means taking up the cross, the symbol at the heart of the Christian faith - dying and resurrection, death and life, reality and hope.

This is a great time of opportunity - people need now more than ever to hear Jesus's gospel message of hope out of death, comfort in pain, healing, blessing. As we go into this next week let's go with ringing in our ears the daily call of Christ to costly discipleship, to take up the cross, and follow him.

And the good news - the very, very good news - is that when we give up our own lives to follow the real Jesus - the suffering Jesus - then our lives are actually saved. If we commit to costly discipleship, to following him daily, to carrying his cross, not in our own strength but in his, then we will find that we have all we need. If we respond to Jesus's call to follow him, we can be very sure of one thing - that he doesn't say, 'There's your cross - pick it up and off you trot'. He walks with us every step of the way. 'I am with you always', he said, 'to the very end of the age'. We consider and weigh the cost that is rightly ours to bear - the call to 'follow daily' - and then we trust God to provide all the rest.

As St Paul says, "*I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Christ, and him crucified.*"

As we commit again this Lent to follow Jesus daily,  
we know that in ourselves we have nothing - and  
yet in Him, we have everything.

## The Vision refresh prayer

Living Lord,  
as we offer to you our common life,

refresh our vision  
that we may know your will  
and seek to follow in all your ways.

May we follow daily as your disciples,  
care deeply for one another in community,  
speak boldly your gospel words of love,  
and tread gently as faithful stewards of your  
goodness.

We ask this in the power of your holy name,  
as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives,  
today and for ever.

Amen.

# 3rd Sunday of Lent

## 07.03.21

### **John 2.13-22 - Jesus Cleanses the Temple**

*The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.'*

### **Sermon notes**

Have you ever done anything really foolish?

Like the German bank clerk who fell asleep mid transfer of 62 euros and ended up transferring 6 hundred and 22 trillion, 2 hundred and 22 billion, 2 hundred and 22 million (etc etc) euros instead.

Or the record company executive who turned down a recording contract with the Beatles on the grounds that "guitar groups are on their way out."

Or bird watcher Sophia Hadi, who drove all the way from Leeds to Washington, Tyne and Wear after a friend there reported hearing a rare thrush, only to find it was, in fact, the noise made by a fork lift truck reversing at the local Asda.

No wonder Puck says in A Midsummer Night's Dream "Lord, what fools these mortals be!".

Sometimes it can seem as though the Christian faith is quite foolish. I guess that's what quite a lot of people would have said about Jesus and his disciples, as they travelled to Jerusalem. Indeed Jesus's own family said he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Jesus seemed to revel in causing outrage and scandal. Eating with tax collectors and sinners. Allowing unclean women to touch his clothes and weep on his feet, telling strange stories about fig trees and wedding banquets. In his Kingdom, the last will be first and the foolish wise. It's a topsy turvy kingdom that turns the 'sensible' things of the world on their heads.



### **Speak Boldly**

I reckon Jesus probably looked pretty foolish when he turned up at the temple and turned over the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. It's a great story, but we've taken the shock out of it. We call it 'the cleansing of the temple', which makes you think he went round with a tissue and some Detox. Jesus actually stormed around the place, throwing

furniture, shouting at the top of his lungs, and flinging money into the air - pigeons fluttering, stampeding cattle, and small furry animals running for their lives. And Jesus in the middle of it all lunging round with a home-made whip.

It happened in the court of the Gentiles, where travellers and non-Jews could come to worship. It was meant to be a place of mission and hospitality. Yet in that place animals were being sold for sacrifice. You had to pay a temple tax, but it was preferred that it was paid in a particular temple currency. And the exchange rate in the temple courts was shocking. It's not the business Jesus is objecting to, but ripping people off in a holy place. It was a system that excluded some people by virtue of their state.

I wonder what you feel passionate about? What gets your goat? What makes you passionate, and even angry? What is it that you would like to take your whip to?

Today we come to the second in our Lent series looking at the 4 themes of the refreshed vision. And this week it is the turn of 'speak boldly'. This is of course about evangelism, the commitment to "share our faith in Jesus Christ in everyday ways, seeking to connect with everyone, especially those currently unrepresented in our churches", but it is also about speaking boldly about, and caring passionately about, the things that God cares passionately about, living for him in the world and speaking out wherever we see oppression, injustice, wrong. And sometimes that might make us look a tiny bit foolish in the eyes of a cynical world.

Jesus stands in a long line of holy fools. It's a tradition we don't hear a great deal about these days. I've been doing a bit more research. There was St Simeon - who dragged around a dead dog and threw nuts in church and blew out the candles, but who also performed miracles and great acts of kindness. Every year, until the

'sensible' church people outlawed it, there used to be a festival called the 'Feast of Fools' (which was a bit like medieval Red Nose Day) - in which a child is made bishop and a donkey brought into the cathedral. The normal, respectable things are turned on their heads - right at the heart of the church.

And what this says, I think, is that at the heart of the gospel is a foolishness, and a playfulness and comedy, and rebellion, that isn't actually a million miles from telling the truth. Just look through the Bible and see who God used to tell the truth. Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years predicting captivity in Egypt; Ezekiel lay before a stone, and ate bread baked on cow dung. Jeremiah buried his underpants! The one who tells the truth and the one who is considered foolish are often one and the same.

### SPEAK BOLDLY

**We will share our faith in Jesus Christ in everyday ways, seeking to connect with everyone, especially those currently unrepresented in our churches. We'll do this in both time-honoured & pioneering ways.**

The other reading set for today is from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he says: "*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God*" (1 Cor 1:17-18). Christian faith might look at times like foolishness, but in a world that at times appears to have lost its head, the cross becomes the wisest and most powerful of things, and proclaiming Christ crucified begins to make real sense.

Jesus reminds his disciples that God will never be contained in buildings (how we have needed to remember that during the pandemic as our

church buildings have been closed) and that the true temple is his own body, that will die and be raised again to life. We as the church are now Jesus's body on earth - his hands and his feet, his voice and his heart, living stones, being built into a new kind of temple for him, the whole people of God living the whole mission of God.

So all this leads me to think again about how I feel about being foolish. Perhaps as the world gets more and more crazy, people who 'speak boldly' about what is right and true will begin to sound more and more sensible.

Maybe in a world where money is everything, freedom to choose is valued above all else, and worship happens at the altars of consumerism, the really wise person is the one who turns the tables on all that and chooses to live in a different way.

So what kind of fool are you?

Perhaps you're the kind of fool who really does actually believe that God is so wildly in love with the world that he gave his only Son to die on a cross, and be raised to life, so that all could come close and know him.

And maybe you're even foolish enough to consider speaking boldly about it.

## The Vision refresh prayer

Living Lord,  
as we offer to you our common life,  
refresh our vision  
that we may know your will  
and seek to follow in all your ways.  
May we follow daily as your disciples,  
care deeply for one another in community,  
speak boldly your gospel words of love,  
and tread gently as faithful stewards of your goodness.  
We ask this in the power of your holy name,  
as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives,  
today and for ever.  
Amen.

## A prayer of St Augustine

'Thou awaken us to delight in thy praises, for thou madest us for thyself, and our heart is restless, until it finds its rest in thee'

# 4th Sunday of Lent

## 14.03.21

### Mothering Sunday

#### John 19.25b-27

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

*(This sermon is based on one first preached on BBC Radio Cumbria on Mothering Sunday 2020)*

#### Sermon notes

Today is Mothering Sunday, a day when we celebrate all of those who have offered us care and compassion throughout our lives, whether that's actual mothers or people who have given us 'mothering', the gift of love and care. Mothering Sunday is a source of joy and celebration, as we give thanks for mothers everywhere, but also of pain, as we recognise that family life is seldom easy, and there are people everywhere who feel the pain of loss of mothering in so many ways - those who have been unable to have children, those whose mothers who have died, those who have difficult relationships with their mothers, and those who are separated from loved ones for one reason or another - which today, of course, is most of us.

Although, we rightly now use it to celebrate the contribution of mothers everywhere, Mothering Sunday isn't really about mothers at all in its origins. Originally it was a time where people celebrated and gave thanks for the 'Mother Church', and was the Sunday on which they returned to their home churches where they'd been baptised. So that's why, of course, this Mothering Sunday takes on an added poignancy today, when many of us are not going into our local church buildings due to the restrictions around the Covid pandemic. We are finding other ways of worshipping, and praying, and being church together, much of it online and from our homes.



**Care Deeply**

But it's strange isn't it? It feels unusual and peculiar at best. Even painful. Meeting together with our fellow worshippers is something those of us who do it often (or even occasionally) value so much. And for the time being many of us are not able to be together in person in the same way.

Now you'd be forgiven for thinking that the gospel reading we just heard is a slightly odd one to have on Mothering Sunday - The Crucifixion? It is what's set as the reading for today in the church's calendar, but it does seem at first glance to be a bit gloomy, a bit depressing. Surely that reading is for Good Friday? We could cope with it then! Why today can't we have something a little more promising, with spring and flowers and sunshine - and hope?

Perhaps the reason that reading is set for this day is that it describes really accurately the bittersweet reality of love and loss that is most people's experience of mothering, and indeed of family life in general. Mary, the mother of Jesus, alongside his mother's sister; his friend, Mary Magdalene; and his closest friend John. Together they look on as Jesus suffers and dies on the cross. And even as Jesus hung there on the cross, in his love and care for us, dying for the sins of the whole world, he was concerned to make sure that, after his death, his mother would have someone to care for and someone to care for her. And so he commended Mary and John to each other.

"Woman, here is your son.", "John, Here is your mother."

And there, underneath the cross, a new family is born, a family not based on blood ties or nuclear family relationships, but on mutual devotion to the One on the cross above them, under the shadow of its suffering. Jesus's death on the cross makes possible new relationships and breaks down barriers, between humankind and God, and between us all. That's what the cross of Christ shows us. The cross is the very opposite of social distancing. The cross shows us that God has come very near to us in Jesus Christ.

The theme of the refreshed vision we think about today is the call to 'care deeply'. These 2 small words carry so much meaning. Of course we are called to care deeply for those we love, and even for ourselves (one of the things many of us find

most difficult!). We are to care deeply for our brothers and sisters in the church, fellow Christians, if you like. And we are certainly going to need a whole lot of pastoral care as we emerge from the challenges of lockdown that have resulted in so much pain and suffering for so many. We are also to care deeply for the local communities in which God has set us, including the worldwide family of humanity of which we are all a part. That is a whole lot of caring! It could be easy to feel overwhelmed.

But at the heart of this simple story of Jesus's mother Mary and Jesus's friend John at the cross, and Jesus's instruction to them to care for each other when he has gone, is the simple message that as a church we are to 'mother' people, to welcome all with gentle compassion, to provide hospitality, to listen, to care and to never give up on caring, to weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn, to join in with others who are likewise offering care in our local communities. As a church we are to be a place where people can come and be at home.

## CARE DEEPLY

**We will listen to our local communities, and respond in loving service, seeking to transform injustice, challenge oppression and pursue peace & reconciliation.**

Our other reading for today is from 2 Corinthians chapter 1 where Paul sets all this in the context of worship: "*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God*" (2 Cor 1.3-5 NIV). When we offer comfort,

another way of saying 'care deeply' for each other, we do so because God has first cared for us and will be with us in our caring, giving us what we need to be able to care and comfort. We are not alone.

And so on this most unusual of Mothering Sundays, our prayer is that, under the shadow of suffering, a new community will be born, a community of people the length and breadth of Cumbria who, even whilst scattered, gather together in Spirit, under the shadow of the Cross, care deeply and discover together the new kind of family Jesus calls us to be.

## A prayer

Loving God, you are one God,  
and you bring together what is scattered  
and mend what is broken.  
  
Unite us with the scattered peoples of the earth  
that we may be one family of your children.  
  
Bind up all our wounds  
and heal us in spirit,  
that we may be renewed as disciples of Jesus  
Christ, our Master and Saviour.  
  
And the blessing of God almighty,  
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,  
be among you and remain with you always. Amen.

## The Vision refresh prayer

Living Lord,  
as we offer to you our common life,  
refresh our vision  
that we may know your will  
and seek to follow in all your ways.  
  
May we follow daily as your disciples,  
care deeply for one another in community,  
speak boldly your gospel words of love,  
and tread gently as faithful stewards of your goodness.  
  
We ask this in the power of your holy name,  
as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives,  
today and for ever.  
  
Amen.

# 5th Sunday of Lent

## 21.03.21

### Passion Sunday

#### John 12.20-33

*Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour. 'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—"Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said*

*that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.*

#### Sermon notes

The Vicar of Holy Trinity Church Cambridge, and founder of the Church Mission Society, Charles Simeon (1759-1836), had carved on the inside of the pulpit, so only the preacher could see it, some words from our reading today, John 12:21, "Sir, we would see Jesus".

For Simeon, these words served as a constant reminder that no matter how learned or eloquent the preacher (and Simeon was both), the purpose of all preaching is to point people, not to the preacher, but towards Jesus.

As we come to the final one of our 5 sermons of Lent focusing on our refreshed God for All vision, that is not a bad reminder to us too. As we live out the vision to follow daily, speak boldly, care deeply and tread gently, the primary purpose of all our words and actions is not to make ourselves look great, as individuals or as churches, but to lead people towards the Lord and saviour of the world - Jesus Christ.



#### Tread Gently

Our passage today describes a scene after Jesus had gone to Jerusalem, where his disciple Philip was approached by some Greeks who spoke those words carved on Simeon's pulpit, "Sir we wish to see Jesus". As Greeks, and therefore Gentiles, they wouldn't have been allowed into the inner courts of the temple in Jerusalem, but they were keen to get close to this man, Jesus,

who they had probably heard about. In his response to Philip (and maybe to them too) Jesus explained the meaning of his death. He explained that his hour had come, that he would die, but through his death and resurrection, everyone - Jews and Gentiles, male and female, young and old - everyone, could be saved. Through his death and resurrection, all people would be drawn to himself, and be able to draw closer to a Holy God. This is the good news of the Gospel!

But the thing we often tend to forget when we think about how Jesus's death saved the world is - exactly that - it saved the world. The whole world. The 'cosmos'. The earth. That includes people of course, but it also includes the whole of creation.

That's what this 4th theme of our refreshed vision is all about, 'treading gently' on this beautiful earth that we not only inhabit, but which we are a part of. Of course caring for the environment is a very good thing to do in and of itself. Many people, of all faiths and none are passionate about climate repair, recognise the need to reduce carbon emissions, to preserve ecological diversity, to protect endangered habitats, to live more sustainable lives.

But for Christians (and for some other religions too) that task takes on an added meaning. We care for the world and the environment not just because our lives and the future of our planet depend on it (which they do), but also because creation care is part of God's plan, and therefore our calling as Christians.

When we read for example a very well known verse like John 3.16 "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...*" we often tend to think that means people only. But the word that is used there means people, of course, but also every living thing and all God's creation. The whole cosmos. Plants, birds, seas, mountains, animals. Everything.

How so?

Well, put very simply, at the very beginning of time God created all of that, that's what the story of Genesis shows us, but because of sin and disobedience to God, the whole story begins to go wrong. Sin, death, sickness, and all the other things we see and experience day by day that are wrong with our world came in as a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience to God. When Jesus died on the cross he came to put all of that right again, not just for human beings but for the whole of creation.

Dave Bookless the director of the eco-charity A Rocha puts it like this:

*"... the world was created good, has been spoilt by sin, but through Jesus there is the hope of salvation both for people and for the whole creation. For many years I didn't understand this. I believed Jesus came to bring salvation for people and that was the end of it. The world didn't matter ultimately, because Jesus would rescue us from it. Now I've come to see that this is only half the story. God is much bigger than I'd realised, and his purposes in Jesus are much more far-reaching than I'd ever dreamed". (Planetwise IVP).*

## TREAD GENTLY

**We will strive to safeguard the integrity of God's creation, seeking to sustain and renew the life of the earth.**

Jesus was at one with creation. He lived peacefully on the earth, and when he wanted to explain the things of faith he did so through the things of nature. His stories feature fig trees, seeds, weeds, wheat, yeast, fish and trees. So it's no surprise that when he tries to explain the meaning of his death to those who are listening, he uses images from

botany: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life"

(vv.24-25)

Jesus uses this image of a seed falling to earth, and being buried under the earth, before growth and fruitfulness to talk about his own death and resurrection primarily, but also to show us what our Christian discipleship looks like too. It's when we choose to live unselfishly, when we don't put ourselves first always, when we lay down our preferences for the good of other people, and the earth, for the sake of Jesus himself, that we are most closely following the example of our Saviour.

So I wonder if that is the attitude with which we best approach this 4th theme of our refreshed vision? In choosing to take even small steps and actions that contribute to environmental preservation and repair, to 'tread gently' on the earth we inhabit, we're doing so not only because we are 'eco-warriors', but because we are followers of Jesus Christ, who see creation care as a key part of God's story and of our calling to follow him.

Jesus said "*When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.*" This is discipleship, and this is mission. All we can do is show people Jesus, to lift him up in our hearts as he was lifted on the cross, and he will draw all people - and the whole earth - to himself.

## A prayer

Blessed are you, Lord God,  
Creator of heaven and earth.  
Your Word calls all things into being,  
and the light of dawn awakens us to life.  
May your wisdom guide us this day,

that we may cherish and care for your good creation,  
and offer to you the sacrifice of our lips,  
praising you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Blessed be God for ever.

(from *A Time for Creation*, Church House Publishing)

## The Vision refresh prayer

Living Lord,  
as we offer to you our common life,  
refresh our vision  
that we may know your will  
and seek to follow in all your ways.  
May we follow daily as your disciples,  
care deeply for one another in community,  
speak boldly your gospel words of love,  
and tread gently as faithful stewards of your goodness.  
We ask this in the power of your holy name,  
as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives,  
today and for ever.  
Amen.