

# Nottingham NE Circuit. Written Service. 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2023.

Prepared by Rev Alan Hargrave

## Into the Desert.

### Welcome & Notices

Welcome to our worship. If you are following this service on a computer or tablet, you can click on the links to hear the hymns. Otherwise just join in using the words – I think you'll all know these songs.

Today is the first Sunday in **Lent** - a period of forty days leading up to Easter, when we remember Christ's torment and anguish as he wrestled with temptations, with the devil, in the desert. And a time, now, when **we** wrestle with our own demons, our own temptations, ponder our failures, our shortcomings and the sheer cruelty and ruthlessness which human beings are capable of. Lent is the most solemn and serious season of the Church's year. Traditionally it is a time of preparation for Holy Week & Easter. The service for Ash Wednesday, which some of you may have been to, begins like this:

'In the name of Christ, I invite you to observe this holy season of Lent, by prayer, self-denial and charitable giving; by self-examination and repentance; and by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word.'

For many people Lent is about giving things up – alcohol, chocolate, sweets etc. However, its true purpose is self-examination, in order that we might live better lives. Robert Herrick, a 17<sup>th</sup> century poet, puts it this way:

Is this a fast, to keep the larder lean and clean  
From fat of veals and sheep?  
Is it to quit the dish of flesh, yet still to fill  
The platter high with fish?

Is it to fast an hour, or ragged to go,  
Or show a downcast look and sour?  
No: 'tis a fast to dole thy sheaf of wheat  
And meat unto the hungry soul.

It is to fast from strife from old debate  
And hate; to circumcise thy life.  
To show a heart grief-rent; to starve thy life of sin:  
And that's to keep thy Lent.

So, as we begin our worship on this first Sunday in Lent, let us try to still our hearts for a while, in the presence of God who is the Lord of history, of geography and of time, the one who **was** and **is** and **is to come**. Let us pray this prayer slowly, pausing after each line, stilling our hearts as we deliberately come into God's presence.

**I weave a silence on to my lips  
I weave a silence into my mind**

**I weave a silence within my heart.  
Calm me O Lord as you stilled the storm.  
Still me, keep me from harm.  
Let all the tumult within me cease.  
Fill me Lord, with your peace.**

## **Songs**

So let us sing together: **Be still for the presence of the Lord StF 20**

<https://youtu.be/ZugvUQ4m90U>

**Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here;  
Come bow before him now with reverence and fear:  
In him no sin is found - we stand on holy ground.  
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here.**

**Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;  
He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned:  
How awesome is the sight - our radiant King of light!  
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.**

**Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;  
He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace -  
No work too hard for him. In faith receive from him.  
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.**

## **Introduction to the theme**

In the Bible, a lot of really important things happen in the **desert**, in the **wilderness**. Abraham crosses much of the wilderness between the fertile plains of the Euphrates & Tigris to get to Canaan – and then he heads even further south, into the Negev desert. Moses leads the people of Israel out of Egypt and they spend the next 40 years wandering through the wilderness, often lacking food and water. David flees to the wilderness to escape from Saul. Elijah meets God in the wilderness as he flees from Jezebel. John the Baptist's ministry is based in the wilderness, near the river Jordan. And, of course, Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tested, at the start of his ministry.

Going through the wilderness, the desert, is part of all our lives, in many different ways. And the desert takes its toll. It is taking a harsh, a heavy toll on the people of Ukraine right now. People who, just a year ago, were living safe, happy, contented lives, living at peace with their neighbours, full of hope for themselves and their children. Then they suddenly find themselves attacked, bombed, terrified, cold, hungry and thirsty, not knowing where they are heading. Not knowing what the future might hold. Not knowing if there will even be a future for them. People in long lines of refugees – mostly women, children and old people - such as we had not seen in Europe since WW2.

And it is taking a harsh, cruel toll on the people of Southern Turkey and Northern Syria, as they continue to struggle with the consequences of the terrible earthquake – and the aftershocks which are still happening. People who have already suffered the awful consequences of civil war and displacement, now fighting for survival in the cold hills, without even the most basic necessities of shelter, food, water and warmth.

And the wilderness is not just a physical place. It is a place where our soul, our heart, our inner being often finds itself. Many of the Psalms reflect this. The wilderness features strongly in Isaiah's prophecies about God bringing back his people from exile. But the message is always the same. God brings them **THROUGH** the desert, **THROUGH** the wilderness – not **AROUND** it. There is no way around the wilderness. We all go through it in our lives. It may be severe stress at work, redundancy or financial hardship. It may be anxiety, depression or other mental illness. It might be fear for a son or daughter or the breakdown of a relationship. Or, like Abraham and Sarah, the pain of childlessness. It could be a serious bereavement. It may be physical illness – heart disease, cancer, long-covid. Or maybe it's coping with old age and growing frailty. The frustration of not being able to do all the things you used to. The long hours spent just sitting, alone.

And on top of all that, maybe the feeling that God is absent, unreachable, silent. Perhaps wondering if God has abandoned you – or is even punishing you. Such thoughts, such feelings, happen to all of us, to a greater or lesser extent. And maybe that's where some of us are right now. In the wilderness, in the desert. It is part of normal life. But the desert is not an easy place to be. So let us join the psalmist as we sing together the words of Psalm 42, reminding ourselves that, even in the desert places place where the deer pants desperately for water, even when we are dry and thirsty and downcast, God is with us

**As the deer pants for the water StF 544 [https://youtu.be/Jv6Z8t1Tz\\_g](https://youtu.be/Jv6Z8t1Tz_g)**

**As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you  
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you  
You alone are my strength, my shield. To you alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire and I long to worship you.**

**You're my friend and you are my brother, even though you are a king  
I love you more than any other, so much more than anything.  
You alone are my strength, my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire, And I long to worship you.**

**I love you more than gold or silver, only you can satisfy.  
You alone are the real joy giver, and the apple of my eye.  
You alone are my strength, my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire, and I long to worship you**

## **Prayer**

As we reflect on our failure, especially in difficult times, to keep God at the centre of our lives, a special Prayer for Lent. We pray together:

**Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing that you have made and forgive the sins of all those who are penitent:  
create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we,  
seriously lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness,  
may receive from you, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness,  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.**

**Song:**

Now we sing again: **Dear Lord and Father of Mankind** StF 495

<https://youtu.be/YAxiN0egN-l>

**Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways;  
re clothe us in our rightful mind, in purer lives thy service find,  
in deeper reverence, praise, in deeper reverence, praise**

**In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian sea,  
the gracious calling of the Lord, let us, like them, without a word,  
rise up and follow thee, rise up and follow thee.**

**O sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above,  
where Jesus knelt to share with thee the silence of eternity,  
interpreted by love, interpreted by love!**

**Drop thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease;  
take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess  
the beauty of thy peace, the beauty of thy peace.**

**Breathe through the heats of our desire thy coolness and thy balm;  
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire, speak through the earthquake, wind & fire,  
O still, small voice of calm, O still, small voice of calm.**

**Reading**

**Matthew 4:1-11**

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tested by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and ministered to him.

For the Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God**

**Sermon**

So, what can we do if we find ourselves in the desert?

One of the greatest challenges which the great spiritual writers speak about is what they called 'Ennui'. It means something like despondency, despair, the temptation to give up. It is easy to feel that way, when we face our own 'wilderness' experiences - or when we look at the state of the world around us. When those voices inside accuse us, frighten us, play on our minds in the night,

tell us it's all hopeless. Tell us **we** are hopeless. But the scriptures tell us that we are in a battle. Like Jesus, we are called to wrestle with our demons, face our fears.

In order to engage in this battle, there are some important really qualities, which the Bible commends to us, which I do not think we pay enough attention to nowadays. Perseverance, courage, faithfulness, hope, love, kindness, generosity, forgiveness, self-control. These are not just qualities we either do or don't have. These are qualities we can pray for, work on, practice, get better at. They are the qualities that help us keep working for peace, for justice, for the marginalized, for a better world even when the chips are down. These things are worth fighting for, worth living for, even when God seems distant and faith seems like a delusion. We cannot avoid the pain and suffering which life brings. We cannot avoid the demons of our wilderness experience. Rather, we are called to go through it, valiantly, which is what we see so powerfully in the resilience of people in Ukraine or of the aid workers in Turkey, right now.

And we are not alone in our wilderness experiences. One of the great things about the church is that we are a community. And this applies whether we personally are part of a big family - or have no relatives at all. Solidarity. It is one of the most important things we have to offer as a church. Being there for each other. Supporting one another in time of need. Supporting in practical ways, being alongside, visiting, sitting with, weeping with people. And supporting our local community too, through Foodbanks, through offering lunches, warm spaces and in many other ways. And we all know how much such things have helped us, personally, in **our** times of need.

A few months month ago a young woman got in touch with me through Facebook. I recognised her name and was delighted to see her picture with her two children, after so many years. When I knew her, she was a child of 8 or 9 who came to our after-school club and to church on Sunday. Her mum was an alcoholic and her dad was nowhere to be seen. She turned up, with her brother, every Sunday morning, an hour and a half before the service began. The reason she turned up so early was because she and her brother hadn't eaten since school lunch on Friday. So, we always had food in the fridge for them when they arrived. She said to me, a couple of weeks ago: 'When I was a child, Church was the only place I ever felt safe and happy.'

Solidarity and support. We are not alone. And we are not alone because **God** is not some distant, uninterested superman, looking down on us disapprovingly, arms crossed, saying: 'I told you so!' No! God is Emmanuel, God **with** us. God with us in through his only son, Jesus, who spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, alone, famished and thirsty, wrestling with his demons, desperate to be out of there. God knows what it is like to face temptation, testing, opposition, loss, grief, betrayal & desertion by his friends, a 'show' trail where the outcome is never in doubt, a Roman scourging 'til the flesh came off his back in chunks and he is unable even to carry his own cross. And then hanging, gasping for every painful breath, until he dies. God knows.

And he was not just with those who were lucky enough to meet him in the flesh, 2000 years ago. He is the **eternal Christ**. The one who was with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity. I love what it says in 1 Cor 10 where St Paul is referring to the time when the Israelites were in the wilderness. They had no water and were dying of thirst. So, Moses strikes a rock in the desert and water gushes out of it to quench the people's thirst. And Paul says: 'And that rock was Christ.' He was with them then, 1500 years before Jesus was born in the flesh. And he is with us, 2000 years after, too.

I am a great fan of Michael Leunig, the Australian Cartoonist and writer of prayers. One of his prayers reminds me that suffering does not go on forever. He prays, simply:

**'Dear God, these circumstances will change. This situation shall pass. Amen.'**

It reminds me of Abraham & Sarah, childless in their old age, without any future. And God says to them: **'Look towards heaven and see if you can count the stars in the sky. So shall *your* descendants be.'**

About 550 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah assures the people of Israel, who are being cruelly conquered and taken into exile in Assyria, that this is not the end; that they will return. That despite their terrible suffering: **'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad. The desert shall rejoice and burst into bloom.'**

Lent. A time for serious reflection. A time to wrestle with our demons, to face our worst fears. To consider our shortcomings, our failures: as individuals, as a church community, as a nation. A time to gird up our loins and summon up courage. A time to embrace those gospels values of faith, hope, love, kindness, generosity, perseverance. A time to cry out to God. Not just for ourselves. But for those we know who are going through the wilderness right now. For children, like my friend Rebecca, who lack food, love, or proper care. For the people of Turkey, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine - suffering in ways we can scarcely begin to imagine.

So, let us strengthen our weak hands, and make firm our feeble knees, and say to our fearful hearts: **'Be strong. Fear not. Here is your God.'**

**Amen.**

**Hymn            Guide me O thou Great Redeemer            StF 465    <https://youtu.be/5j48TLIRb4Q>**

**Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,  
pilgrim though this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty;  
hold me with thy powerful hand;  
Bread of heaven,  
feed me now and evermore.**

**Open now the crystal fountain,  
whence the healing stream doth flow;  
let the fiery cloudy pillar  
lead me all my journey through;  
strong Deliverer,  
be thou still my Strength and Shield.**

**When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
bid my anxious fears subside;  
bear me through the swelling current,  
land me safe on Canaan's side;  
songs of praises,  
I will ever give to thee.**

## Prayers

So, let us pray together:

Lord God, we pray for the people of Ukraine, for all who are suffering or afraid, for those who are fleeing, for those staying to fight, for those hugging traumatized children in cold cellars, for those who have lost loved ones, for those who have lost everything. We pray that you will be close to them and give them courage and strength. We pray for a justice & peace to end this terrible & utterly unnecessary conflict.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We pray for people in Turkey and Syria facing the terrible consequences of the devastating earthquake. For those who are homeless, cold, without the basics of shelter, warmth, food, medical assistance. For the aid workers and rescuers still searching through the rubble.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We pray for ourselves in this season of Lent, when many of us feel like we in the desert, the wilderness, facing despair or darkness. Help us to look up at the stars and see your glory. We particularly pray against the temptation to lose heart, to give up, to think that there's no point or that what we have to offer is of no worth. Help us to take heart from the many millions of kind, decent people who are opening their hearts and homes to those in dire need. Give us the courage to make hard, costly choices ourselves, to do the right thing; to live with generosity, compassion, love, faith, hope and truth in our hearts. And give us the determination to keep on following in your way, even when the stars are hidden from our eyes.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who weigh heavily on our own hearts just now. Let us name them before God now.....

Lord our God, you are no stranger to pain, suffering, rejection, abuse and cruel death. Give to those who suffer hope, courage and strength in all their troubles. And may they, and all your people, live to see better days.

Lord in your mercy **Hear our prayer**

We conclude by saying, together with all God's people:

**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 and forgive us our sins,**  
**As we forgive those who sin against us.**  
**Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.**  
**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours**  
**now and forever. Amen.**

## Responsive Reading from Isaiah 35

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.

**Like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.**

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

**They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.**

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.

**Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.**

He will punish your enemies, He will come and save you.

**Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped;**

Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy.

**For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert;  
The burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
The ransomed of the LORD shall return to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their  
heads;  
They shall be filled with joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.**

**Hymn** Our final hymn reminds us who the source of all our hope is:

**In Christ Alone StF 351 <https://youtu.be/rn9-UNer6MQ>**

**In Christ alone my hope is found  
He is my light, my strength, my song  
This cornerstone, this solid ground  
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm  
What heights of love, what depths of peace  
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease  
My comforter, my all in all  
Here in the love of Christ I stand**

**In Christ alone, who took on flesh  
Fullness of God in helpless babe  
This gift of love and righteousness  
Scorned by the ones He came to save  
'Til on that cross as Jesus died  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live**

**There in the ground, His body lay  
Light of the world, by darkness slain  
Then bursting forth in glorious day  
Up from the grave, He rose again  
And as He stands in victory  
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me  
For I am His and He is mine  
Bought with the precious blood of Christ**

**No guilt in life, no fear in death  
This is the power of Christ in me  
From life's first cry to final breath  
Jesus commands my destiny  
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Til He returns or calls me home  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand**

**No power of hell, no scheme of man  
Can ever pluck me from His hand  
'Til He returns or calls me home  
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand**



## **Blessing and sending out**

The God who loves us dearly, as his very own children,  
grant us peace, courage, generosity and love, whatever befall.  
And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son & Holy Spirit  
Be among us and remain with us, now and always. **Amen.**

Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**In the name of Christ. Amen**

*Alan Hargrave, Feb 26<sup>th</sup> 2023*