

Sunday 6th March 2022.
A service of worship for use at home
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Nottingham North East
Methodist Circuit

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Welcome & Introduction

I don't know about you but I have found it very hard to concentrate on anything this week. Every time I sat down to prepare this service my mind was elsewhere. In the Ukraine. Thinking about men, women and children trapped in buildings being shelled by Russian troops. Thinking about Putin and his cronies and wondering what they will do next? Trying not to look at the news every five minutes but finding myself doing so anyway. Wondering if there is any chance of a peaceful outcome? Wondering how far this conflict will spread? Wondering how long it will last? Wondering what the future will look like for my children and grandchildren. A very different future from the one I imagined, just a few years ago, when the world seemed a much more stable and safer place than it is today.

And here we are now, on the first Sunday in Lent, the most serious season in the church's year. a period of forty days and nights leading up to Easter, when we remember Christ's torment and anguish as he wrestled with hunger, thirst and temptation in the desert. And a time, now, when we face our own temptations, ponder our own failures, our shortcomings and the sheer cruelty and ruthlessness which human beings are capable of. A very serious time of year at a very serious juncture in the history of Europe.

So, as we begin our worship, let us try and still our hearts for a while, in the presence of God who is the Lord of history, beyond all geography and time, the one who was and is and will be forever. Let us slowly pray for ourselves and for the people of Ukraine:

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.

And now, as we sit, let us quietly sing these two worship songs as we bring our troubled hearts to God.

Songs:

Be still for the presence of the Lord SoF 40

Be still for the presence of the Lord the Holy one is here
Come bow before him now in 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 splendor 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.

As the deer pants for the Water SoF 27

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.

I want you more than gold or silver,
Only you can satisfy,
You alone are the real joy giver,
And the apple of my eye.

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.

Responsive reading Let's now read together Psalm 46 which reminds us that, ultimately, **God** is our refuge and strength and he will deliver us, even from the terrors of war.

God is our refuge and strength,

a very present help in trouble;

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved,

and though the mountains tremble in the heart of the sea;

Though the waters rage and swell,

and though the mountains quake at the towering seas.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,

the holy place of the dwelling of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; therefore shall she not be removed;

God shall help her at the break of day.

The nations are in uproar and the kingdoms are shaken,

but God utters his voice and the earth shall melt away.

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

Come and behold the works of the Lord,

what destruction he has wrought upon the earth.

He makes wars to cease in all the world;

He shatters the bow & snaps the spear & burns the chariots in the fire.

'Be still, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth.'

The Lord of hosts is with us;

the God of Jacob is our stronghold.

With all that in mind, let us commit ourselves to observing this Holy Season of Lent and, in particular, to use it to work for and to pray to God for his peace and justice on this earth. Therefore, 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; by reading and meditating on God's Holy Word; and by living out the Gospel.'

A special prayer for Lent:

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, worthily 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.**

And now we sing again, asking God to forgive our folly and to restore his peace and calm.

Hymn: Dear Lord and Father of Mankind SoF 79

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, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm; O still, small voice of calm.

Bible Readings 1. 2 Corinthians 4:1-11

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. ⁶For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

⁷But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. ⁸We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. ¹¹For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal

flesh..... ¹⁶ So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

2. Luke 4:1-13

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread."

⁴ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

⁵ Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸ Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.'"

⁹ Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,'

¹¹ and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

¹² Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" ¹³ When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

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

Sermon

The first letter of John says: 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'. And how incredibly easy it is to deceive ourselves! Some of you may have come across John Hull, the blind, former professor of theology at Birmingham University, who died a few years ago. I remember him telling a story, from his church in Birmingham, of a woman, Janet, who was invited by her friend Brenda, another church member, to Sunday lunch. They had lunch, during which Brenda's husband behaved rather strangely and then, after lunch, promptly fell fast asleep. The two women went into the kitchen to do the washing up. And as they were chatting Janet said to Brenda: 'Excuse me saying so Brenda, but your husband is pissed.' Brenda was totally shocked. She replied: 'No, no – he's always like that.' 'Well then' said Janet 'in that case he's always pissed.'

It was the beginning of the painful realization, at first for Brenda, and later for her husband, that he was, indeed, an alcoholic, something they were **both** in denial about. That the big pile of whisky bottles in the garage had accumulated **not** over many years, but over the past few months. And that they both needed to do something serious to address it, which, eventually, they did.

'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us'.

Self-deceit is a serious problem for all of us. It is so easy to fool ourselves. And, it is all too easy for our nearest and dearest to **collude** with us in our self-deceit as well. Self-awareness, honesty.

So important. And so very difficult. Getting down to the nitty-gritty of failure & sin is painful & difficult - but it is also extremely important & necessary, if we are to grow in faith and discipleship.

It is interesting to note the specific temptations with which Jesus is tempted. (Or, at least, the ones that are reported in the gospels.) Some people have suggested that they encapsulate **all** the things **we** are tempted by: food & material goods; power & authority; popularity & recognition. However, what about cheating & lying? Or gossip? Or selfishness? Or cruelty? And where is sex? Not to mention a host of other things. It would appear that Jesus' temptations are probably specific to him. And, I suspect, the temptations **we** suffer from, and probably frequently give in to, are specific to us, too.

Roman Catholics have what I think is a helpful a concept called: '**besetting sins.**' Besetting sins are the things we **always** fall for. The weaknesses we **always** seem to succumb to. The ongoing difficulties we **continue** to battle with, throughout our lives. For me, one of the 'besetting sins' I battled with throughout my working life was: **ambition**. Ambition is a subtle enemy. There is a very good, godly, positive side to it. The ambition that wants to be and do our very best for God; to use our talents to the full and not leave them buried in the ground. But it has a dark side too.

The desire to be recognised, to **be** somebody, to have status, to be popular, to have power. And it twists its subtle knife into your ribs, not just in terms of your own longing for recognition or promotion. It stabs you, too, when **someone else** is preferred or promoted ahead of you.

Especially if its someone you don't rate or, maybe, can't stand. '**Him**, a Bishop? Unbelievable! **I** could do a much better job than **HIM!**' And before you know it, it's eating you up inside. And, just when you think you've beaten it, once & for all, it raises its ugly head again. 'Why did they review **THAT book** in the Methodist Recorder - and not mine? Eh?'

Besetting sins. The ones that are **always** lurking, always ready to catch us out. Creeping up on us, just when we think we've dealt with them for good. Those things we have to **keep on** battling with, right throughout our lives. As indeed Jesus did. His temptations in the wilderness were not the only time he was tempted. Look at Gethsemane, where he is clearly battling with the thought that he could escape the cross. But instead, once again, he submits himself to what he knows is right. 'Not my will, but yours, be done'.

I wonder what **your** besetting sins are? Maybe it's pride, or gossip, or a lack of generosity, or being judgmental? Or maybe you struggle to tell the truth - the whole truth? Maybe its anger, or envy, or bitterness, or an inability to forgive? Maybe there are some people you can't stand, hate even?

One day, when we were working in Bolivia in the 1980's, we were discussing Jesus' exhortation to: 'love your enemies'. I said: 'I haven't got any enemies'. My wife, Annie, replied: 'Oh yes you

have!' Looking suitably hurt, I replied: 'Well, who are **my** enemies then?'. 'Well' she said: 'Ronald Regan, for a kick off. And Margaret Thatcher for another. You hate them'.

And I thought..... 'Yes. It's true. I do hate them.' For their policies that hurt the poorest people in Bolivia – and in Britain too. I **did** hate them. And I had to deal with it. And start to pray for them, instead. And now, loving my **current** enemies. So hard. How to love Jacob Rees-Mogg. Or worse – much worse – how to love Vladimir Putin. Is that even possible for me? And in any case, what would it mean in practice?

And indeed, it may not be someone else you hate. Maybe the person you hate is **yourself!**

Or, maybe, like Brenda's husband, you have an addiction. And, frankly, I'd be amazed if at least some of us this morning were **not** struggling with addiction: to alcohol, or gambling, or pornography, or shopping, or food, or whatever. Indeed, you could argue that **all** our besetting sins are, in fact, some form of addiction.

So, why not take a minute or 2, on your own, to think: 'What are **my** besetting sins? Not anyone else's – **mine!** The things I always struggle with; always fall for? Are there things I **haven't** acknowledged? Things I am reluctant to accept? What are **my** besetting sins? /////////////// (*take 2 minutes*)

I wonder how you got on? You'll be glad to know I am **not** going to ask you to share them. However, you may need help in recognizing or dealing with them. So, who could **you** turn to, to help you identify and deal with your besetting sins? Who can you trust? Who has the wisdom and the skills to help you? Who might help you deal with your besetting sins?

But dealing with our temptations and our sins is **not** just an **individual** problem. In Jesus' ministry, he addresses not just individual sin, but also **institutional** sin, too. For example, he criticizes the whole way the temple operates, calling it: 'A den of robbers.' We have heard a lot in recent times about institutional racism, sexism, privilege and abuse. It affects charities, schools, universities, police, armed forces, business, government and, not least, the church.

One of the things I admire about modern Germany is that it has seriously confronted its past. Most Germans have a strong sense of national shame & repentance over the horrors of the Nazi era. That 'national soul-searching' is something we have **never** done in this country, despite some of the terrible, shameful acts we have committed, not only in our colonial days, but in more recent times as well. And those things affect our national life, our actions, our view of ourselves and others, in a negative way, today. I wonder, what the besetting sins of Britain are? What are the unhelpful things which go on, week after week, unchallenged and unchanged? Things we maybe just don't notice, because they've become so normal.

Perhaps surprisingly, 'sin' isn't just about sex, money or violence. It involves other, more subtle, things too. And one of those things is something I, personally, am very prone to. It is something St Paul mentions twice in our reading from 2 Corinthians 4. And it is something many great spiritual writers have addressed down the centuries. It is what St Paul calls the temptation to 'lose heart'. Which can also be translated: 'become discouraged' or 'become tired of' or 'to let things daunt us' or, most commonly & simply, 'to give up'.

This is a serious temptation for me, personally. In temperament I am definitely a natural 'melancholic'. I tend to look on the down side of things. I imagine the worst. I easily feel downhearted. But St Paul entreats us not to fall into that trap, if we can possibly help it. In his letter to the Philippians, he exhorts us to 'rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice.' In 1 Thessalonians 5 he tells us to 'give thanks in all circumstances'. And he ends his letter to the Philippians saying: 'Finally, brothers & sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy: think about, and dwell on, **these** things.'

We live in dark days. But these days are certainly no darker than those our parents and grandparents lived through. I watched the film '**Belfast**' at the Bonington last Sunday night. Any of you seen it? Go and see it if you can. It is about a family living in Belfast through the troubles of the late 1960's, with all the horror of hatred, retribution, indiscriminate violence and killing. And yet also, in the middle of all that, the kindness, resilience, courage, solidarity, generosity, joy and humour of the ongoing, daily life, of so many good, decent people. Much as we are seeing on our TV screens now, with the people of the Ukraine, despite the terrible Russian onslaught and the overwhelming odds against them.

Those who lived through and wrote about the Nazi concentration camps of WW2 all insist that we **always** have a **choice**. Even if we cannot **do** anything about our external circumstances or what happens to ourselves or others. We can always choose **how we respond**, in our inner being. Choose what to focus our hearts and minds on. Choose how to respond in our hearts to what is going on around us.

I am sure you've heard the story of a young Cherokee warrior, who goes to seek advice of the chief. He says: 'I seem to have a battle going on inside me between good and evil, each fighting for my soul. What can I do?'. The old man replies: 'Well, there are two wolves inside each of us. One is the good wolf, telling us to do the right thing; to be kind, generous, thankful, hopeful and true. The other is the bad wolf, urging us to be selfish, unkind, resentful, devious, to do what we know is wrong – or simply to give up. They are at war with each other inside us.' The young man thinks for a moment & says: 'Yes, my father, but which one will win?' The chief looks at him with compassion and replies: 'The one you feed!'

If we feed our selfishness, our pride, our bitterness and our resentment. If we feed anger, sexual frustration, dislike of others, our taste for gossip, our addictions. If we feed our sense of hopelessness, our despair, our temptation to stop trying and to give up – then those things will grow, and fester, and they will eventually consume us - and consume others as well. But if we feed love, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, courage, hope, faith, truth, kindness, justice and joy. If we make the effort to see the best in people – then these things will grow strong, and be a blessing, for us, and for others too. And they **will** make a difference. And, who knows, they may even lead to a better world.

In the name of God, Father Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

Song: God forgave my sin SoF 129

God forgave my sin in Jesus' name,
I've been born again in Jesus' name;
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share His love as He told me to.

He said: 'Freely, freely, you have received,
Freely, freely give;
Go in My name, and because you believe
Others will know that I live.'

All power is given in Jesus' name,
In earth and heaven in Jesus' name;
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share His power as He told me to.

He said: 'Freely, freely, you have received,
Freely, freely give;
Go in My name, and because you believe
Others will know that I live.'

Prayers:

Loving God, we pray for the people of Ukraine,
for all those suffering or afraid, for those who are fleeing, for those staying to fight,
for those hugging their traumatized children in cold cellars
that you will be close to them and protect them and give them courage and strength.
We pray that President Putin would come to his senses.
We pray for world leaders, for compassion, strength and wisdom to guide their choices.
We pray for the world, that in this moment of crisis, we may reach out in solidarity
to our brothers and sisters in need.
May we walk in your ways so that peace and justice become a reality,
for the people of Ukraine and for all the world.
We ask this in the name of Christ our Lord. Amen.

We pray for ourselves. At the beginning of Lent, we pray for insight and self-awareness, that we might not deceive ourselves but acknowledge our own faults and have the courage and determination to address them. 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 give is of no worth. Help us to live with generosity, compassion, love, faith, forgiveness, hope and truth in our hearts.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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

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. Amen.

We conclude with the Lord's prayer:

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 temptation
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now & forever. Amen.

Hymn: All my hope on God is founded

All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew,
me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone, calls my heart to be his own.

Pride of man and earthly glory, sword and crown betray his trust;
what with care and toil he buildeth, tower and temple fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.

God's great goodness aye endureth, deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendor, light and life attend him, beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore, from his store, newborn worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the almighty Giver bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth, pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand, at his hand; joy doth wait on his command.

Still from man to God eternal sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising for the gift of Christ, his Son.
Christ doth call, one and all: ye who follow shall not fall.

Blessing and Dismissal

Jesus says to his troubled and frightened disciples, and he says to us, too:
'Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. In the world you will have troubles. But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.'

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his son Jesus Christ our Lord. And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be among us and remain with us, now and always. Amen.

So, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen