

WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, FORREST
March 9th, 2025,
10.45am
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT AND THE LITANY OF ASHES



Gesù Deserto – Jesus in the Desert

The Season of Lent begins on Ash Wednesday. Lent is about seeking a deeper reading of human beings, the way we live and our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Lent is that season when we dwell upon the human condition and the world.

Having journeyed through Epiphany and the vision of what the Good News is in terms of light for all peoples - the mission of the church - we discover that becoming light in the world ourselves, is not altogether easy.

Today we begin with the story of Jesus' most human moment. Both Luke (4:1-13) and Matthew (4:1-11) include stories of Jesus' temptation of "testing". Mark however includes no such reading. Rather, replaces the account by focusing upon two themes that constantly re-occur throughout his gospel in one way or another: first, that in and through Jesus, the barrier between the heavens and earth is swept aside – we as humans are open to grand possibilities in the image of God. Second, that as for Matthew and Luke, the wilderness is a place of preparation, of personal struggle, as we are asked to sort ourselves out, or to use the language of St Ignatius of Loyola, the father of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), 'order our "disordered attachments"'.

THE GATHERING OF GOD'S PEOPLE

Prelude **Partita on 'O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid', Var. 1-5** Hans van Nieuwkoop (b.1948)

Introit **Create in Me a Clean Heart** *Music: Healey Willan, Words: Psalm 51:10-12*

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence, and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation, and hold me with Thy free spirit.

Lighting of the Community Candle

Acknowledgement of Country and Our Mutuality

We are fortunate to be meeting on the lands of the Ngunnawal and Ngambri peoples, who have been the stewards of this country for generations. We recognize their deep connection to the land, waters, and the stories that are woven into the fabric of this place.

The Uniting Church in Australia believes that all people are made in the image of God, and so we accept every individual regardless of race, age, creed, sexuality and gender.

The liturgist greets the people in the name of the Holy Trinity

Greeting

In the name of the Father,
and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

And also with you.

Call to Worship

On this first Sunday in Lent, we join Jesus in the wilderness, a place of wild and dangerous things, of testing away from the security of home.

God, rescue us in the wilderness!

Once again, we watch and listen as we are tested. We find our security in Jesus, who does not waver from the truth.

God, rescue us within the wilderness!

Once again, we face our own frailty and realize that the wilderness is not nearly as dangerous as our choices to prioritize self-interest and myriad forms of personal power.

God, rescue us through the wilderness!

Once again, we call upon God in the wildernesses of our lives, and we trust God's faithful help.

God, rescue us through the wilderness!

Hymn 164 The Great Love of God

Music: Elisha Hoffman (1839-1929), Arr. Charoen Vijaya (1960), Words: Daniel Niles (1908-70)

A prayer of adoration in which the liturgist and congregation share

Prayers of Adoration

God, you are our refuge.

You are the shore in sight,
you are hands that reach out,
you are the ground on which to rest.

God, you are our strength.

You are the life we long for,
you are the refusal to give up,
you are the keys of home we carry with us.

God, you are our help in time of trouble.

We call on you from the ruins and the rubble,
We call on you from the wildness and the deep,

All: Meet us in this place!

Amen.

*Cláudio Carvalhaes, Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World
(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 40.*

A prayer which imagines Jesus' own experience followed by a prayer of confession

**Imagining the Human Condition through the Experience of Jesus from Matthew 4:1-11
and Luke 4:1-13**

It is the empty time just before morning,
the light just beginning to touch
the tops of the hills,
just beginning to palm the skins
of the desert stones.

First one stone and then another
begins to change colour as
the sun lifts
into a red-orange sky.

First one stone and then another
emerges from shadow,
small solitudes of darkness
in the solitude of wilderness
in the emptiness of early morning.

Jesus is awake, blankets clutched
to keep out the cold
while he sits and watches stars
fade in the spreading dawn.
Hunger gnaws at his belly
like a dog chewing a bone.
Looking at a stone, he thinks,
**How like a loaf of bread
this rock appears.
How comforting such
food would be. . .**

Lifting his head in the direction
of Jerusalem, Jesus pictures
the sunrise on the rooftops
of the Temple,
gleaming in the light like

the spires of marble mountains.
He imagines his feet astride
that proud building's pinnacle
and himself

**not weak, but mighty,
not being hungry but full,
not vulnerable,
not breakable should I fall. . .**

The wind begins to rise, stirs
the dry and scrawny grasses.
Jesus ponders the passage
of time, the rise and fall
of kingdoms, the tides
of marching armies,
the endless quests for power
that sweep up people and nations
like sands in a desert wind.

He imagines himself
**at the head of
a host of armoured thousands,
lands and nations to serve me
like the pharaohs, like David,
like Caesar ruling from Rome. . .**

Jesus sighs, and stands and stretches,
a solitary and hungry
yet somehow satisfied man,
and folds the dusty blankets.

Day has come to the wilderness around him.
The sun is full and blazing.
Jesus starts to walk from
the desert
toward the towns and the cities
His feet leave firm prints in the sand.

Confession

We confess that when we read of your temptations, we excuse ourselves, we give ourselves
the benefit of the doubt.

We reason that we are not you.

We forget that you are not only Saviour; you are example.

We still insist that we are not you.

Forgive us when we have not resisted; when we have folded.

Help us to choose a life grounded in you. Amen.

*Written by Valerie Bridgeman Davis, The Africana Worship Book, Year C (Nashville:
Discipleship Resources, 2008), 146.*

Assurance of Forgiveness

We are all beggars.

We are all people insufficient to even ourselves
plagued by unending doubts,

restlessly compensating for our imagined and real deficits.

But the good news is the best of all: we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God!

Doxology 134 V.1 Music: John Goss (1800-80), Words: Henry Lyte (1793-1847), based on Psalm 103

Praise, my soul, the king of heaven;
to his feet your tribute bring;
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
who like me his praise should sing?
Praise him, praise him, hallelujah,
praise the everlasting king!

The Peace

The peace is shared either through the taking of the other's hand, by placing our right hand over the heart, or clasping our hands together in a prayerful gesture with a slight bow.

THE SERVICE OF THE WORD

Collect

Heavenly Father,
your Son battled with the powers of darkness,
and grew closer to you in the desert:
help us to use these days to grow in wisdom and prayer
that we may witness to your saving love
in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer for Understanding

Open our ears and minds to the complexities of following you O Lord.
The imagination to begin
to comprehend, to rethink and to surrender our established world views,
as we genuinely listen to the world view of Jesus. **Amen**

Hebrew Bible: Deuteronomy 26:1-11, pp. 158-159

Deuteronomy is set in the context of the Israelites gathered on the east side of the Jordan ready to cross the river into the promised land. The book purports to be a series of speeches by Moses to them. Today's passage which comes near the end of the longest speech (Dt 4:44-28:68), anticipates a time when Israel has come into the land and settled there. The passage constantly reminds the reader, as Moses did the Israelites, that the land is a gift from the Lord (vv. 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 11). The offering is not symbolic of taking possession or claiming ownership of the land. Rather, it has everything to do with recognising the land and its bounty as a gift. This fits with the broad ecological sympathies of the Hebrew Bible, where the land is not simply a means for generating wealth, but part of God's living creation that must be respected and honoured, in a post-Exodus, free world. It also clarifies the crucial point that the land was not to be seized, but to be fostered with others already there.

When you have come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, "Today I declare to the LORD your God that I have come into the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to give us." ⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of the LORD your God, ⁵you shall make this response before the LORD your God: "A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. ⁶When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, ⁷we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil,

and our oppression. ⁸The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; ⁹and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. ¹⁰So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O LORD, have given me." You shall set it down before the LORD your God and bow down before the LORD your God. ¹¹Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the LORD your God has given to you and to your house.

Epistle: Romans 10:8b-13, p. 921

A brief commentary: This snippet comes from Paul's very difficult discussion in Roman 9-11 about Israel. He stood accused of betraying his own Jewish tradition by effectively declaring that Israel's status as God's people now counted for nothing. How could Paul do such a thing? Are his accusers then right that he was trying to set up a new religion? Why, then, bother about the Hebrew Bible at all? Marcion, a leader of the later Church would later argue along these lines. Paul engages in a range of arguments in Romans 9-11, finally reaching a climax where he asserts that God has not abandoned the promises to Israel. Israel is still special to God and there will be hope for them in the future, even though now they seem determined to reject Christ and the Christian message. Paul has no idea how this will happen. What is central to Paul is the idea that Jesus is beyond rules and laws. Rather, God gets right into people's hearts and minds. His argument is that this has a dynamic effect which the system of obedience to the Law did not have and so is another reason why religious rules or legalism as he sees it, should be taken off the shelf.

"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); ⁹because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. ¹¹The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame."

¹²For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. ¹³For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Hymn 444 Dear Shepherd of Your People Music: Trad. English melody, Arr. Cecil Sharp (1859-1924), Words: John Newton (1725-1807)

Gospel: Luke 4:1-13, p.835

A brief commentary: To offer a brief comment on this passage, also found in Matthew, is really difficult. Clearly Jesus was surrounded by expectations about what he would and would not do and had to confront his own neuroses or "disordered affections". If we read back into this reading through the lens of the early Church, it too found itself in difficulty as it acted on the mission for the kingdom but found itself in a quandary over the question of its place in society and the power that it was ceded as it became more established and powerful. The question in this reading is then not just for Jesus but for the Church and for Christians and others, who have to manage the question of power in its various forms.

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where 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. ³The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." ⁴Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'" ⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And 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. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" ⁹Then 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, ¹⁰for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' ¹¹and '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.
This is the Gospel of the Lord - **Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ**

Anthem The Lord is Full of Compassion Music: Philip Moore, Words: Psalm 103 from Common Worship

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and of great kindness.
He will not always accuse us, nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his mercy upon those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west, so far has he set our sins from us.
As a father has compassion on his children,
so is the Lord merciful towards those who fear him.
For he knows of what we are made; he remembers that we are but dust.
Our days are but as grass; we flourish as a flower of the field;
when the wind goes over it it is gone, and its place shall know it no more.
But the merciful goodness of the Lord is from old,
and endures for ever towards those who fear him,
and his righteousness on children’s children;
on those who keep his covenant and remember his commandments to do them.
Glory to the Father and to the Son: and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now: and shall be for ever. Amen.

Preaching

Hymn 546 Lord Jesus, Think on Me

Music: from William Damon’s ‘Psalmes’ (1579), Words: Synesius of Cyrene (c. 375-430), Tr. Allen Chatfield (1808-96)

A LITANY OF ASHES

Something about Ashes

In ancient times Jewish people used ashes
as a symbol to show God they were sorry.

It is all symbolic -
of letting go of things
that may once have been useful or right
but are no longer useful
or are now not right for us
and for the world we live in.

With ash as a symbol
which for a short time we wear as a reminder
we can use this day
to name those things
we would like to put behind us,
to let go, to release,
to have no power within us any longer,
freeing us for a new life
free from their burdens.

Prayer over the Ashes

(Lift the bowl of ashes.)

O God, listen with us in the wilds of this moment,
as we try to find your voice
through all the other voices that echo and surround us.

(Oil is mixed into the ashes.)

Pour your grace upon us
and shape us into something new.

Imposition of the Ashes in Silence

The ministers say as they make the sign of the cross upon each person's forehead. *"Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. Hold on to this grace as you receive these ashes today"*

Offering

Meditative music is played as the offering is made. The people stand as the stewards bring the offering forward and prayers are offered

Prayers of the People

We pray for the people of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. We also give thanks for the life of a great thinker of the Christian church, the German Friederik Schleiermacher. We also continue our prayers for the peoples Ukraine and Gaza amid the unpredictable 'shifting sands' of nation states.

Liturgist: Lord, by your Spirit

Response: **grant what we ask.**

SENDING OUT THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Announcements

Hymn 416 Great God, Your Spirit, Like the Wind *Music: Charles Parry (1848-1918), Arr. Gordon Jacob (1895-1984), Words: Alan Gaunt (b. 1935)*

Blessing

Postlude Partita on 'O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid', Var. 6

Hans van Nieuwkoop (b.1948)

Liturgist & Preacher: Rev'd Dr. Geoff Dornan
Music Coordinator: Jade McFaul
Organist: Lorraine Macknight
Wesley Music Scholars: Evangeline Osborne and Phoebe Bourke (choir)
Bible Reader: Graeme Brown
Stewards: Christie Idowu and Elspeth Hunter
Video and Sound: David Benger and Keith Hart
Flowers: Bethel Webb