

# 21 February 2021

## West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Nanda Groenewald

Reading: John 1:43-51

Hymn: CH4 714 Gather us in

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### PRAYER

Loving God, thank you  
for drawing us together to be your people.  
Help us to see ourselves as you see us.  
Give us faith to hear your words of love  
beyond some of the hard realities of our lives.  
May your Holy Spirit guide and inspire us  
to recognise your presence in all we do.

Loving, faithful God,  
your love is absolute,  
your promises irrevocable.  
We look up after a shower of rain,  
marvelling at the colourful  
beauty of your rainbow –  
a reminder of your promise  
and faithfulness to all generations.

Wherever we happen to be –  
wilderness, mountain or valley bottom –

your Holy Spirit is with us.

Beloved Lord Jesus, you stepped from water to wilderness,  
from God's voice to the taunting voice of the enemy.

In the wilderness of today's world, we face many enemies, many  
temptations. Forgive us for succumbing to selfishness, greed, anger,  
power.

Lord most high, forgive us, we pray.

Forgive us when our minds fail to focus on you and your word.

Help us to remember that no matter what we're going through, you've  
been there before us.

Whether we're swimming in the warm waters of your love, or journeying  
through the arid wilderness, help us not to lose sight of your hand  
guiding us to eternal glory at rainbow's end.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, Who art in heaven,

Hallowed be Thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy Will be done,

on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.

Forever, Amen.

## READING

### Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. <sup>2</sup> After fasting for forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. <sup>3</sup> The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

<sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the highest point of the temple. <sup>6</sup> '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.'"

<sup>7</sup> Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

<sup>8</sup> Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. <sup>9</sup> 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

<sup>10</sup> Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

<sup>11</sup> Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

## MESSAGE

We are now finding ourselves in the time of Lent – 40 days to prepare ourselves for Easter. In a way it can be seen as a "wilderness experience", a time of focusing on the suffering of Jesus.

Our reading today was about Jesus' *actual* wilderness experience. 40 days and 40 nights alone in the wilderness, with nothing but temptation to keep him company...

This happened immediately after his baptism, when God publicly confirmed Jesus as his Son.

Let me quickly read you Matthew 3:16-17:

*<sup>16</sup> As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'*

As I've told you before – in the 1<sup>st</sup> century Mediterranean Culture, society was driven by honour and shame. God bestowed honour on Jesus with these words, and what happens next, in the wilderness, takes place to confirm this honour.

His time in the desert with the devil must have been really hard on Jesus.

How could he handle it so well? Because he knew who he was. He was God's beloved Son. And God's beloved son can handle anything...

**This is our first lesson from today's story:** If we know *who* we are, God's children; and *by whom* we are loved, God himself; we will be able to handle whatever life throws our way.

But let's get back to our story. Jesus was fasting in the wilderness for 40 days and 40 nights. That seems to be a very long time to not eat anything, but please remember that in those days to fast didn't mean that you were not allowed to eat at all, it only meant that you were not allowed to eat anything while it was daytime.

And we've spoken about the 40 days before too, because there are plenty references to events taking place for 40 days or 40 years in the Bible (Noah in the ark, the Israelites in the desert, and so forth) – in those days 40 indicated the right amount of time, the amount of time God wanted something to take place for.

So, Jesus was in the wilderness for exactly how long he was supposed to be there, to confirm to the whole world that what God said about him was true.

The devil tempts him, and every time Jesus is stronger than the temptation, and he replies with a quote from Scripture. **Here is another wee lesson for us** – answers to the most difficult questions in life, can be found in the Bible. So it's more than worth it to read the Bible often!

The Israelites were also tempted when they travelled through the desert for 40 years many years before this. But time and time again they gave in to temptation. Here Jesus is showing them that it is possible to be stronger than temptation.

Jesus must have been starving, and like the Tempter said, it would be really easy for him to turn the stones into bread, but Jesus reminds him

that there are things in life that are more important than satisfying your hunger.

Then the Tempter wanted him to test God and see if he would really catch him if he falls, but Jesus didn't need God to prove his care in this way, he knew he was always safe in the hands of God.

And then the Tempter promised him riches, honour and fame if he worshipped him, but apart from the fact that none of this was the Devil's to give in the 1<sup>st</sup> place, Jesus would never worship anyone or anything but God.

And yet again here we see another reference to their culture, because if something happened 3 times over, it would be regarded as true. Jesus passed this test, consisting of 3 questions, with flying colours.

He stayed true to who he was, and now everyone would know that he was really the beloved Son of God.

And although this whole ordeal must have been really hard for Jesus, he never once questioned God about it. He was thrown into a situation and he handled it to the best of his abilities. Because although it wasn't easy on him, he knew God wouldn't allow it if he didn't have a purpose with it.

**Lesson number 3:** We can so often complain about our circumstances, or even question God's presence in our lives because of our circumstances, when actually, the best thing we can do in any circumstances is to just get on with it and do our very best, because no amount of complains or questions will change our situation!

So, to summarise: In Biblical times, words were not enough, it had to be confirmed by actions. God said that Jesus was his beloved son, and Jesus confirmed this by not giving in to temptation. And now his public ministry could begin.

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I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't only teach the people of his time, and us, a few lessons while he was there in the wilderness. I'm sure he learned a lot about himself too.

I think God teaches us so many lessons through the ordinary things that happen to us every day... We just need to be open enough to realise this.

Let's take the snow as an example. It started snowing shortly after Christmas, and this carried on for roughly 40 days and 40 nights!

A wilderness experience of sorts!

And because it's Fabulous February and we are making our own fun this month, I decided to share some of the fun things we did in the snow with you today, to illustrate my point.

So what *have* we learnt from the snow?

- Firstly, a single snowflake is very delicate and fragile, but just look what they can accomplish if they stick together! It never ceases to amaze me how thick layers of snow can stick together on thin branches and stay there for days... (*Video clip*)

The same thing is true for us as Christians – by ourselves we can sometimes feel fragile, but if we stand together, we'll be amazed at what we can accomplish!

- Secondly, sometimes things can get too much for us. It can feel as if we are “snowed under”. There were days this past month when my boys couldn't find their rugby and footballs outside, because it was completely covered by snow! And we couldn't use Andre's car because of all the snow on top of and around it, but who's ever said you can't have fun on the trampoline, even if you can't see it for the snow?! (*Video clip*)

No matter how overwhelming our circumstances are, God's love for us is always deeper, and always bigger, than whatever we are going through. And remember – snow ALWAYS melts at some point...

- Thirdly, if we start making the wrong choices, we can very easily find ourselves on a slippery slope, and believe me, once you start sliding down that slope, there is no stopping! (As you can clearly see here where my boys dared me to sledge with them!) (*Video clip*)

So if you know you are on the wrong path, turn around straight away, before it gets impossible to change the direction of your life!

- In the fourth place, my boys decided to build an igloo (of sorts), and even slept in it till about 1am one morning! And my surprise



here was how strong snow can be! Like bricks! And that something so very cold, could actually be used to provide shelter! (*Video clip*)

Sometimes life can surprise us. Sometimes the person we expect it from the least, can mean the world to us: someone we experienced as icy can bring warmth into our lives. So let's always be open to the fact that God can surprise us.

- And then lastly – I've never seen the snowploughs and gritters work as hard as they did this winter! And thank goodness for gritters! Otherwise we might have been stuck for long periods of time... But the snowplough scrapes the road clear, and the grit that is spread from the back makes sure that the road stays clear, at least for a while! (*Video clip*)

And that is what I think we should be like as Christians. Jesus is like the snowplough – he came to clear the way for us. We should be like the grit – spreading the love of God as far as we go, to make this journey through life as easy as possible for those around us and those behind us...

But... snow or no snow, if you feel like this time of lockdown has been a wilderness experience, the longest, hardest "40 days and 40 nights" you've ever experienced, please just remember *who* you are and *who* you belong to... Don't ever feel *tempted* to just give in or give up, because the only way to get through any wilderness experience, is just one wee step at a time, by the grace of God...

Amen

## **HYMN**

### **CH4 714**

Gather us in, Thou Love that fillest all;  
Gather our rival faiths within Thy fold;  
Rend each man's temple veil, and bid it fall,  
That we may know that Thou hast been of old;  
Gather us in.

Gather us in—we worship only Thee;  
In varied names we stretch a common hand;  
In diverse forms a common soul we see;  
In many ships we seek one spirit land;  
Gather us in.

Each sees one colour of Thy rainbow light,  
Each looks upon one tint and calls it heaven;  
Thou art the fullness of our partial sight;  
We are not perfect till we find the seven;  
Gather us in.

Some seek a Father in the heavens above;  
Some ask a human image to adore;  
Some crave a spirit vast as life and love;  
Within Thy mansions we have all and more;  
Gather us in.

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Creator God, you made us in your image  
to be your people, wherever we go.

This coming week, whatever we experience,  
wherever we find ourselves,  
help us to know that you are with us –  
guiding, revealing and sustaining – always.

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with  
you all, and with all whom you love, on this day, and forever more.

AMEN