

9th January 2022

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's Service set out below.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Song:

Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea;
a great High Priest whose name is Love,
who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is graven on his hands,
my name is written on his heart.
I know that while in heav'n he stands
no tongue can bid me thence depart,
no tongue can bid me thence depart.

When Satan tempts me to despair
and tells me of the guilt within,
upward I look and see him there
who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Saviour died,

my sinful soul is counted free;
for God the just is satisfied
to look on him and pardon me,
to look on him and pardon me.

Behold him there, the risen Lamb,
my perfect, spotless righteousness,
the great unchangeable I AM,
the King of glory and of grace.

At one with him, I cannot die;
my soul is purchased by his blood.
My life is hid with Christ on high,
with Christ my Saviour and my God,
with Christ my Saviour and my God.

The sermon given by Robert Hughes: The Call of Faith.

Luke 3:15-22. (Also Acts 8:14-17, and Hebrews 11)

Next week we begin a teaching series about 'Faith'. And by timely coincidence the lectionary for today brings us a New Testament reading that introduces it well. Let's start by acknowledging the plain message of our passage from Luke: The people knew their scripture; they knew Isaiah had prophesied the coming of a 'Messiah' (e.g. 9:2, 6:7). Those who believed the promise were waiting. Then word filtered out. A desert preacher, John, seemed to fulfillment Isaiah's words. Was **he**

the Messiah? When they went to ask John, himself, he told them 'no' but he said that Jesus **was**. And then the voice of God confirmed it.

However strong their belief or unbelief, the people coming to John in the wilderness evidently had unmet need: I remember that great evangelist, Billy Graham, coming to Earls Court in London. Many who came shed tears of joy. Others came forward broken, alone in the sea of people, to be saved. What propelled them; was it religious conviction, or something else?

I have often wondered whether coming to faith can ever be regarded as an act of 'will', so to say. I'm increasingly inclined to accept that faith resides in all of us, in every Spirit, the Spirit we each have - even if we don't know it. We are, after all, creations of God - children of God. Navigating faith these days, I look for consistency rather than logic.

Quite early in my life I came to realise we are on our own in this world! Though we may be surrounded by people, - family, friends, and strangers - only **we** can live the life we have. My sudden sense of detachment - from parents, from everybody else - came with a shock not with sadness; instead it drew my mind to an empty place. It brought me a picture of desert, empty from horizon to horizon, wilderness. I saw a landscape of peace, untouched by any concerns familiar to me. This momentary 'vision', if that is what it was, seemed accidental, and so - barely more than a child - I didn't see any significance in it at the time. Yet it was, I now realise, my first spiritual experience (Joel 2:28).

These days, the empty space I saw then, the 'wilderness within' has become for me a place of beauty, a place to which I regularly return. Because when later my spirit took me back to it, it was there that I first discerned God's presence, 'heard' God. So now when I want to pray, to seek, to listen, and sometimes to pour out my heart, that is where I go. Unlike the people trekking out to see John, however, my own journey does not tire my feet. I just close my eyes. (Ephesians 1:18).

I don't know whether any of this resonates with you. It's not something I generally speak about. But I suspect many will relate to it. Anyway, it's that journey inward that comes to mind as I read today's scripture. The picture Luke paints is packed with symbolism; people stopped what they were doing and came expectantly, looking for 'the Christ'. Why? The term they used, 'the Christ', has a specific meaning: It describes the divine Son of God, the Anointed King or "Messiah", the One positioned and purposed by God to deliver us from the evils of the world in ways impossible to everyone else (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7).

In my terms that's a god who loves me, loves the world and everyone and everything in it without pre-conditions; a God who favours justice. (John 17). By complete contrast the world teaches that approval must be earned; it has invented cynicism and failure. The point is, God is calling us, not because we're naughty or nice but because we are here, integral to the life of creation; we

belong. And because God speaks into our spirit from the spiritual realm, it is to that inner world that we must journey.

Are you surprised that I am not emphasising God's affirmation of Jesus that day by the Jordan River. Surely, you ask, that event alone is justification for our faith? Yet the promise of Jesus came before our need of him lay fully exposed. It took three and a half thousand years in the wilderness to gather a faith capable of recognizing Him.

There is a rather more troubling, a necessary symbolism, a darker reality in wilderness: Wilderness is manifestly devoid of earthly provision; a place where survival rests upon providence ... (which we know is God's providence!). And in places like this we quickly notice anyone we see. And when we do, we know without asking they are as vulnerable as we are, that we need one another as well as God; that we are in a sense 'responsible' for one another (Genesis 18:2); a theme pursued by Jesus.

You might already have understood that we can be driven into that 'internal wilderness' - the empty space within - by pain and unhappiness, by rejection - not called into it by God: For there is many a man-made wilderness into which people are forced by our behaviour towards one another. The needy - the sick, the lonely and afraid, are separated from the world familiar to us, and vulnerable; often far from help and hope. Yet, as I have suggested, like the people with John in the scrubland of the Jordan basin, we are all so very much more likely to encounter God in such wilderness.

In the weeks ahead, we will come to hear sermons exploring faith from many perspectives, bringing new things to our ears, looking more deeply into familiar things. But in matters of faith, rational thinking is so often useless. So come like the people to John, not resting upon your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6). Open to your spirit. The history of faith is teachable, the arguments for faith are explainable, but the compulsion to faith is a mystery deep within each one of us - within our DNA, so to say - except that it's in no sense 'explainable'.

The alternative is to deny the voice; to stop listening; to abandon all sense of God, to attribute spiritual experience to something else, to lose the hope we might have had in life. Then we will lean instead upon the constructs of science, or economics, or social theory, or even religion, forgetting that none of these are responsible in any way at all for bringing us into existence.

- Joseph – innocent and forgotten in a foreign prison - Genesis 39:20
- Moses – with Jethro's flocks for about 50 years in the wilderness - Exodus 3:1
- The people of Israel - brought out into the wilderness for 40 years - Joshua 5:6
- Ruth – leaving home to cross a foreign wilderness with Naomi - Ruth 1:16-17
- David – hiding from Saul in the wilderness - 1 Samuel 23:19
- Elijah – taken by God into the heart of the wilderness - 1Kings 17:1-6
- Jesus – chooses to go for 40 days into the desert - Matthew 4:1-11

- Paul – enters wilderness for 3 years after meeting Jesus - Galatians 2:1



Prayer

Dear Lord, make your presence known in my life; Grace me with a pure heart and a simple faith. Let my trust in you come; let it abide with me forever; let it be enough. **Amen.**

Prayers: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* (Philippians 4:4-6)

- Pray for this day, and the coming week.
- Pray for justice, mercy, peace, and hope.
- Pray for individuals, for neighbours, for family and friends.
- Pray for the Church.

Collect: First Sunday after Epiphany: Eternal Father, who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son, anointing him with the Holy Spirit: grant to us, who are born again by water and the Spirit, that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**



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. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. **Amen.**

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, COGS, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

The Notices: We are now holding services in the building on Sundays at 8am, 9.30am & 7pm and are live streaming the 9.30 service. This Paper Service will continue for the moment and is available the week after the service.