



FIRST WEEK OF LENT

The First Sunday of Lent, 21 February 2021

In the gospel today, we are presented with Mark's account of the Temptation of Christ (see Mk 1: 12-15). It seems odd to think of Jesus, the perfect and sinless one being 'tempted by Satan' (Mk 1:12). It is here that the reality of incarnation comes home in that **'we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin.'** (Heb 4:15). Mark presents a very simple account of Jesus being in the desert, the place of total abandonment, the place of being with **'the wild beasts'** and where **'angels looked after him'** (Mk 1: 13).

In the desert, we are left to our own devices: there is no Wi-Fi signal, and our mobile phones are useless. On this Sunday you might ask yourself: What are the wild beasts that I am struggling with? What are the situations that keep me from God and others?

We would do well today to reflect on how we minister to and help others: What can I do today to make someone's life that bit easier? Can I lift a burden of pain from their backs? Can I be that person who will take the word of God seriously in my life? Will I **'repent and believe the Good News'**? (Mk 1: 15).

Today, and every day of the whole season of Lent, is a time to hit the 'pause button' in our increasingly busy and complicated lives. Covid-19 has forced the world and the Church to face the business of the lives that we are invited lead; we have some to see what we can do without, even though it might cause us pain. The pandemic lockdown has, I hope, put us in touch with deep, inner feelings that we might never had time for before. I am always glad that our friend and guide, Michael Winstanley can point a way forward:

We may feel disorientated by the noise and speed and stress of our world, disturbed by the individualism and greed around us, alarmed by the relentless march towards ecological disaster. As a member of the Salesian family, I am deeply concerned about the impact of this on our young people the world over.

M T Winstanley SDB **'Lenten Sundays'** Don Bosco Publications, Bolton 2011

Jesus is in this 'Lenten desert' with us and goes before us with a message of peace and reconciliation for all. It is through His strength that we get the energy to minister to others—to be those angels of mercy and life. We can be real angels of compassion today, and remember, true compassion belongs to God — it's God's own special virtue. He is the compassionate one. Sometimes we may think that God creates little difficulties for us to try and overcome to gain merit or something like that. But this is not true. God can only love, and we are invited to live in that love today.

You should look at your negative side. If you can't, you can never move forward. We have got to face our negative side, because it is only through facing our own negativity, that we

can face our personal pain and hurts. Nobody fully learns from success and glory, but we can learn so much from loss and pain. In the desert of failure, we learn to make a new and honest path forward.

Today is a strong invitation to learn how to be patient with people, and to learn how to love the way that Jesus loves: no conditions, deepening our understanding, and, with this kind of love, bringing yourself and others a new flowering of hope — a new and exciting life. We are all 'works in progress'

Today: reflect on and remember this:



Photo by Tifari on Pixabay

We can pray:

For each step that we might take, be our guide, O Lord of life
For each load that we might bear, be our strength, O Lord of life
For each mountain we might face, be our power, O Lord of life
For each river that might impede, be our safety, O Lord of life
For each place where we might rest, be our peace, O Lord of life
For each sunrise and sunset, be our joy, O Lord of life.

Lenten Prayer from 'Faith and Worship'

Monday 22 February 2021

Chair of St Peter

This feast brings to mind the mission of teacher and pastor conferred by Christ on Peter and continued in an unbroken line down to our present Pope Francis. We celebrate the unity of the Church, founded upon the Apostle, and renew our assent to the Magisterium of the Roman Pontiff.

You might ask 'why a chair?' In St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican, and in every Cathedral across the world, there is the 'CATHEDRA' or the Bishop's chair; it is not meant to be seen as a royal throne, rather it is a chair of service. Since early times, the Roman Church has had a special commemoration of the primatial authority of St Peter. As witness to one of the most renowned of the Apostolic Fathers, the Roman See has always held a peculiar place in the affection and obedience of believers because of its "presiding in love" and service over all the Churches of God.

I remember one special visit to the Holy Land, when we were celebrating mass in the Chapel of the Primacy of Peter. The chapel is built on a large outcrop of rock, and this is also visible inside, in front of the main altar.



*Rock and stairs from older church: Church of the Primacy of Saint Peter
Fallaner, [CC BY-SA 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons*

Tradition has it that this is the place where Jesus said to his trusted friend, **“You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church”** (Matt 16:18); pilgrims love to come and touch this sacred place, as they feel a direct physical connection with Jesus and that early group of Apostles.

As our reading shows, there were very various misconceptions about Jesus that were popular in his time, but it is Peter who can make this astounding profession of faith: **“You are the Christ, the son of the living God”** (Matt 16:16). I was preaching to our pilgrimage group along these lines, when suddenly the doors were flung open and what seemed like

over a hundred pilgrims flooded into the small space. I could see that some of our pilgrims were a little upset—after all this was their reserved mass time and this was precious to them. I quickly found out that these pilgrims had come from Goa in India; they had travelled thousands of miles and were on a very tight schedule to see as much as they could. It was right that we stopped our celebration of mass to allow our Indian sisters and brothers to have a short experience with us. It hit me very forcibly that we were a church of unity—this simple act of sharing our space and time was so important.

Today we must remember Pope Francis and the difficult task that he has; he is criticised by one group for 'not doing enough' and by another group for 'doing too much.' It saddens me to see Catholics publicly standing against our Holy Father and garnering support for their own ideals—like you, I am upset when this criticism comes from Bishops and clergy who should know better. We are a family in the Church; we can have our disagreements and upsets, but we must, and should, support each other because that what families do.

Today: remember Pope Francis and spend a moment, offering gratitude for all those who have occupied the Chair of Peter

We can pray:

Lord God, we offer our joyful prayers in thanksgiving for our Holy Father Francis, Vicar of Christ and Servant of the servants of God. In Pope Francis we recognize the successor to Peter, the touchstone for the mission of the Church. We pray that your Holy Spirit will strengthen him to be a messenger of love, peace and unity. We give thanks for the many gifts of the Shepherd of our church. May he please you in his holiness and guide his people with love and watchful care, especially for the sick, the poor and the vulnerable. We greet him joyfully and pledge our love and support for him. With him, we accept the invitation to spread the Good News of the Gospel in word and action. We offer our prayer through our Lord, Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever. Amen.



*Chair of St Peter,
Gayo [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chair_of_St_Peter.jpg) via Wikimedia Commons*

Catholic Health Association of America

Watch and listen: 'The Keys to the Vaults of Heaven' from the musical 'Whistle Down the Wind' (Andrew Lloyd Webber and Jim Steinman)—a beautiful reminder of where we find our treasure today.

<https://youtu.be/O7w4B-bTeUQ>

Tuesday 23 February 2021

In today's gospel Jesus invites to not to **'babble'** (Matt 6:7), using a kind of 'word fruit salad'; rather, Jesus wants us to speak lovingly to **'our Father in heaven'** (Matt 6: 10), just as a child would talk their dad.

I will never forget visiting a water park in the Galilee many years ago on a school pilgrimage to the Holy Land—there are only so many 'holy places' that teenagers can cope with! It was amazing to hear little Israeli children running around calling out, 'Abba, Abba!' It hit me how special and intimate this use of *Abba* is in the ministry of Jesus; his love and unity can be seen in that simple word, *Abba*.

To stop the babbling and empty words, Jesus offers the prayer that we probably all say many times during the day. In this simple prayer, we express our unity and strong desire that the **'kingdom come ON EARTH as it in heaven'** (Matt 6:10)—our faith is not other worldly or just 'pie in the sky'. Christianity is rooted in reality and Christians share that reality as they pray to make this prayer real in their lives.

We pray that all who are hungry will be fed; we pray for the gift of forgiveness for our faults and failures, but it is dependent on our being part of reconciliation too. Are you prepared to reach out to those who have made your life a misery? Can you forgive those who are cruel, wicked and hurtful to you? It is a big ask, but this is the reality of being a true Christian.

This daily prayer, a prayer that unites and keeps us as one, the *Our Father* is a constant daily challenge to see how far we have advanced the reign of God in our lives.

How have we fed the poor? How have we forgiven others? How have we accepted forgiveness and those little signs of reconciliation that are offered to us? Are we stubborn? Do we stand on our dignity and refuse to love as we should? Do we just babble our way through even this great prayer of unity?

Today: set aside some time so that you can really PRAY the Our Father

We can watch and pray:

The Lord's Prayer – Andrea Bocelli <https://youtu.be/u8jlmjg4UY?t=56>



*The 'Our Father' in Hebrew:
Church of the Paternoster, Jerusalem
Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons*

Wednesday 24 February 2021

In both our readings today, we are presented with the image of Jonah: we come face-to-face with this Hebrew prophet, who seems to have issues. In our first reading, we see his obedience to God in warning the people of the great city of Nineveh of impending doom if they did not change their ways. They listened to the words of God, spoken through his prophet, and changed their ways for the better.

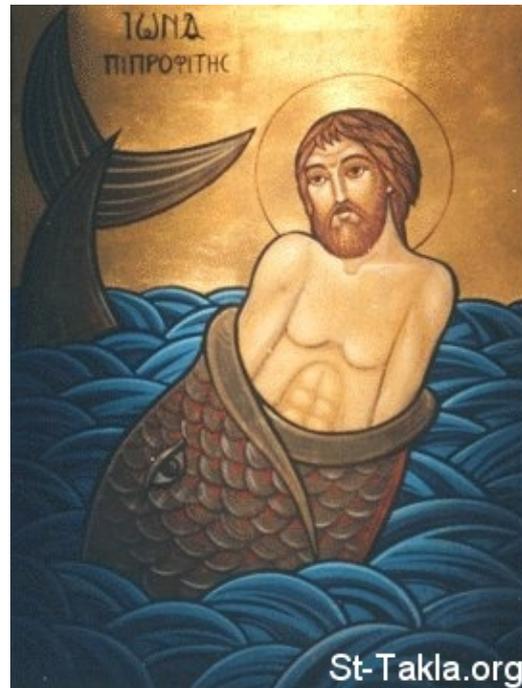
Lent offers us that same chance to think deeply about our own personal relationship with God and how we can make a real difference. Just like each of us, Jonah is far from perfect and he certainly made mistakes: he is seen in the Old Testament as the most disobedient of the prophets; when God told him to go east, he went west instead. The 'sign of Jonah' was surely not the severe dose of gastritis that he gave to that poor whale; so much so that the whale simply could not stomach him anymore and threw him up! However imperfect Jonah was, he was the agent of change in the lives of the people of Nineveh.

Jesus asks the same from us: can you be an agent of change? Can you do something today that is going to make a difference? When we hear the word of God one cannot remain neutral anymore; hearing the word of God demands a response. When you hear the word of God you cannot remain sitting on the fence. Hearing the word of God entails making the right decision. As a Cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI wrote these words, encouraging Christians to be involved:

Wherever Christ has been present, afterward it cannot be just as if nothing had happened. There, where he has laid his hand, something new has come to be. This points us back again to the fact that being a Christian as such is to be transformed, that it must involve repentance and not just some embellishment added onto the rest of one's life. It reaches down into our depths and renews us from those very depths. The more we ourselves as Christians are renewed from the root up, the better we can understand the mystery of transformation. Finally, this capacity things have for being transformed makes us more aware that the world itself can be transformed, that it will one day as a whole be the New Jerusalem, the Temple, vessel of the presence of God.

God is Near Us, Joseph Ratzinger Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2003

Today: do something that is going to make a difference in the life of a family member or friend.



Coptic icon of Jonah via St-takla.org

We can pray:

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the Lord his God. He said:

In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me.

From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

You hurled me into the depths, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me.

I said, 'I have been banished from your sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple.'

The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head.

To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.

But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit.

When my life was ebbing away, I remembered you, Lord,
and my prayer rose to you, to your holy temple.

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them.

But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you.

What I have vowed I will make good.

I will say, 'Salvation comes from the Lord.' *Jonah 2:1-9*

Thursday 25 February 2021

We are presented with the account of Jesus offering advice to his disciples: "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you." (Matt 7: 7-8). We are invited to put our trust in God so that our prayer can become a conversation. We are invited to 'knock' and that can be difficult for some people—we only tend to knock on the doors of people we are comfortable with—people that we like to spend time with. Personally, I find it difficult to knock on the doors of complete strangers, yet it is needed and essential, if true pastoral ministry is going to be followed. I was lucky to work in school once where the head had an 'open door policy': whenever her office door was open, you could walk in and share your concerns and joys—it was a policy for staff and students. Doors play recognizable roles in our everyday lives, literally but metaphorically too. Doors open and close all the time, they provide passage and protection, they lock to ensure a certain amount of safety and privacy, they shut outside and welcome in. Doors provide opportunity but also curtailment. They convey responsibility too. We like to say that "when God closes

one door, he opens another," the implication being that it's still up to us whether to cross the threshold. This maxim about God closing one door and opening another isn't actually in the Bible, but something like it does show up in church liturgies for Advent. There's an antiphon sung just before Christmas that celebrates Jesus as he "who opens what no one shuts, and who shuts what no one opens, who breaks down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and who delivers his captive people into freedom." Today we pray that these doors do not become a barrier to us; we pray that we have an open-door policy-that we can speak honestly and fully with our God.



Sanctuary knocker at Durham Cathedral, by Yorkshireman on Pixabay

Today: ask God for something that you need in life-something that will make your life better.

We can pray: Loving God, we ask you to be with us in our prayer today-help us to realise that we are pushing a door that is already open. May you come into our lives today and be that inspiration and guide that we need-especially in the difficult decisions we may have to make. AMEN

Friday 26 February 2021

There is sometimes the misconception that Jesus was some radical who wanted to do away with ancient Jewish traditions; that Jesus wanted to abolish the teachings of the law and the prophets. As we see throughout Matthew's gospel nothing could be further from the truth. If anything, Jesus wanted to strengthen the law and make his followers fully aware of the centrality of the Torah in their lives. Thus the commandment 'you must not kill' takes on a much deeper meaning for Jesus: you must not be angry with your sisters or brothers—you must not even call each other names.

Jesus recognises that we can harm others by our temper and refusal to listen. We can all make mistakes, but when those mistakes become a habit, then we are not learning or open to true reconciliation and peace. We have to have an open attitude in our dealings with others: of course, we are never going to murder anyone, but do we destroy people's reputations with our lies and gossip? Do we harm others in our quest to be right all the time? Can we ever actually say that we are genuinely sorry?

Lent is that wonderful time to seek true reconciliation—we can seek forgiveness in the sacrament, but it is much harder to **'leave your offering there before the altar and go to reconciled with your sister or brother'** (Matt 5:24). In going to seek forgiveness from someone you have wronged, you have to burst out of your selfish bubble and admit that you **were** wrong.

We can make all kinds of excuses, especially in this period of lockdown; but if you need to be reconciled with someone, just pick up the phone, send an email or write a card. We are called to live the law of Christ in our lives—today you can make a difference; you can lift the terrible weight of guilt or hurt from the shoulders of another.

It really does not matter whose fault it is—can you be the bigger person today?

Today: reach out, in a spirit of true reconciliation, to someone who has hurt you.

We can pray:

Loving God, you have reconciled us in Christ Jesus and have given us the ministry of reconciliation. We pray for all those from whom we are estranged. Bring healing to strained or broken relationships. Forgive us for the times we have wronged others, whether by ignorance, neglect, or intention.

Grant us the courage and the grace to seek their forgiveness and opportunity to make amends. Where others have wronged us, grant us a gracious spirit, that we might forgive even as we have been forgiven in Jesus Christ.

Amen.



'Go reconcile with your brother'
Bernadette Lopez via Qumran2.net

Saturday 27 February 2021

Today we have the reality of this law of Christ hitting home: 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (Matt 5: 44). This injunction just seems so impossible and unrealistic—how can we offer kindness to those who hate us and make our lives difficult? How can it be possible? Jesus certainly practices what he preaches, as we see in his passion and death; from that hill of hatred and division, Jesus, nailed to a cross, cries out, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing!" (Lk 23:24).

Time and time again, through history we have examples of such great forgiveness. I am always taken by the reaction of so many survivors of the Nazi death camps: they refused to join in the murderous fury and the understandable desire for retribution. Eva Kor, a survivor of Mengele's experiments on twins at Auschwitz, said:

For most people there is a big obstacle to forgiveness because society expects revenge. It seems we need to honour our victims but I always wonder if my dead loved ones would want me to live with pain and anger until the end of my life.

Eva Kor, <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/eva-kor/>



Photo by Toa Heftiba on Unsplash

Ghandi, Dr Martin Luther-King Jnr and Nelson Mandela offer us amazing examples of non-violent protest against wrong. We cannot live in a society that accepts racism or bullying, but the only effective way to stand up to these wrongs, is to ensure that our world is a safer and better place for all its citizens, regardless of creed and colour. President Nelson Mandela of South Africa often spoke of the decades he suffered imprisonment under the evil that was apartheid; he knew that he must offer true forgiveness or else he would never

be able to be truly free. While forgiveness of those who hurt us is never going to be easy, it brings a real sense of freedom:

I always knew that deep down in every human heart, there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite. Even in the grimmest times in prison, when my comrades and I were pushed to our limits, I would see a glimmer of humanity in one of the guards, perhaps just for a second, but it was enough to reassure me and keep me going. Man's goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished.

Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus, New York 2013

Today: be that one who truly forgives

As a society we must give thanks to God for raising up inspirational leaders like Nelson Mandela among us. Like all of us, he had his flaws, but he had a vision for the world that we all need to share—that is his legacy, and we can all make it happen, if we want. Do you want it?

We can pray:

This day we give thanks for the life of Nelson Mandela. He led a nation on a long walk to freedom. He fought for reconciliation and not retribution. He argued for peace in place of war. Lord, we give you thanks for Madiba. When other surrendered to darkness he kept faith with the promise of tomorrow. He envisioned a path to "heal the wounds of the past...with the intent of constructing a new order based on justice for all." His work inspired the world. Lord, we give you thanks for Madiba. In his time, the powers and the principalities reviled Jesus. The leaders of great nations in our time called Mandela a terrorist and a communist. Powerful interests stood up for white supremacy during the Apartheid era. Mandela stood up for the least of these. Lord, we give you thanks for Madiba. Death is not the final victory. Nothing can silence the voice of Nelson Mandela - not Robben Island, not death. His voice will echo throughout time. Lord, we give you thanks for Madiba. Let us have an ounce of his courage. Let us have an ounce of his faith. Let the work of Nelson Mandela continue in us. Lord, we give you thanks for Madiba. Amen.

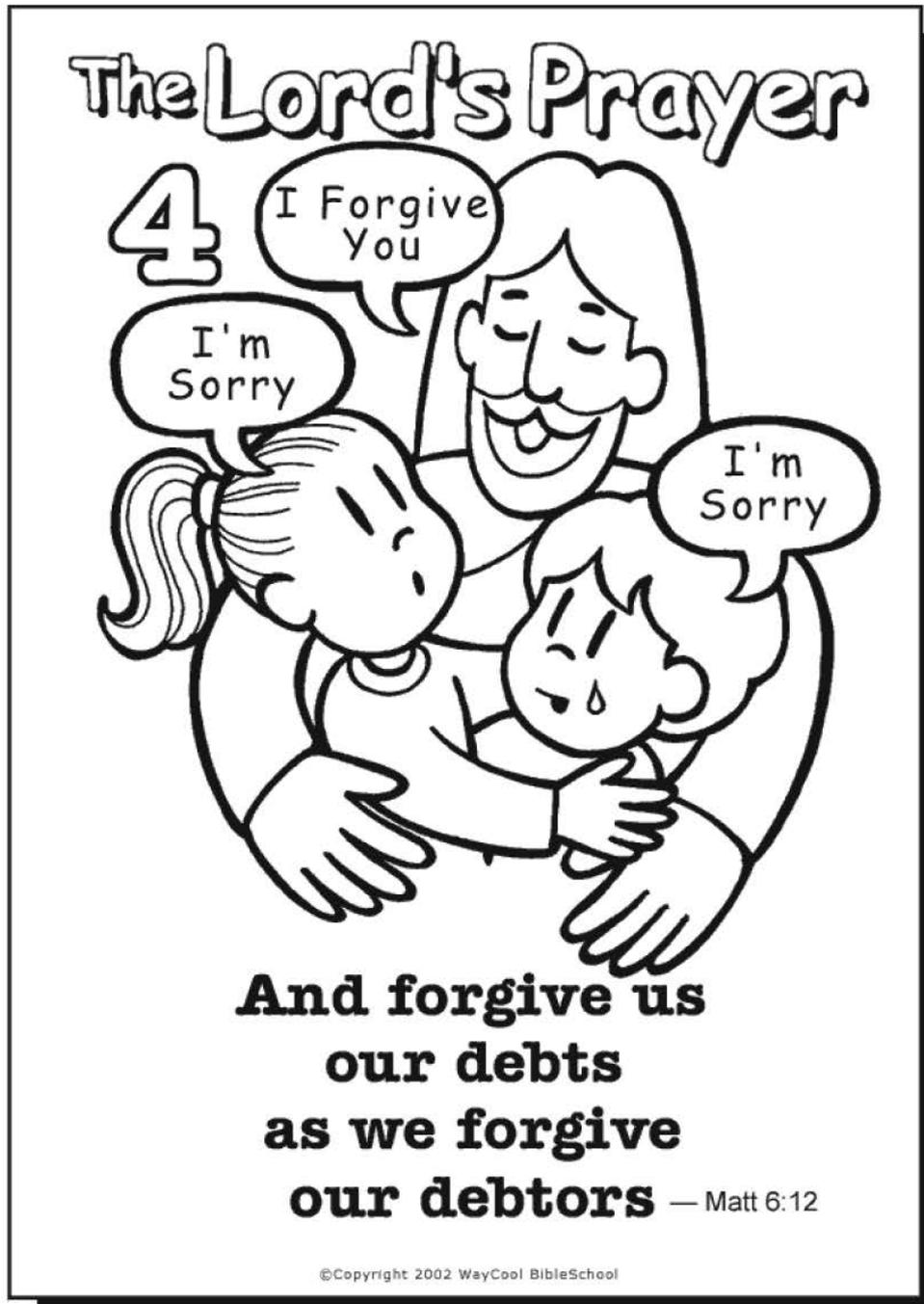
Rev Dr. Chuck Currie, Director of the Centre for Peace and Spirituality and University Chaplain at Pacific University

Watch and pray:

The closing of the memorial service for Nelson Mandela at Westminster Abbey

<https://youtu.be/fhfP7whQc5o>

For children



Forgiveness Coloring Page



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