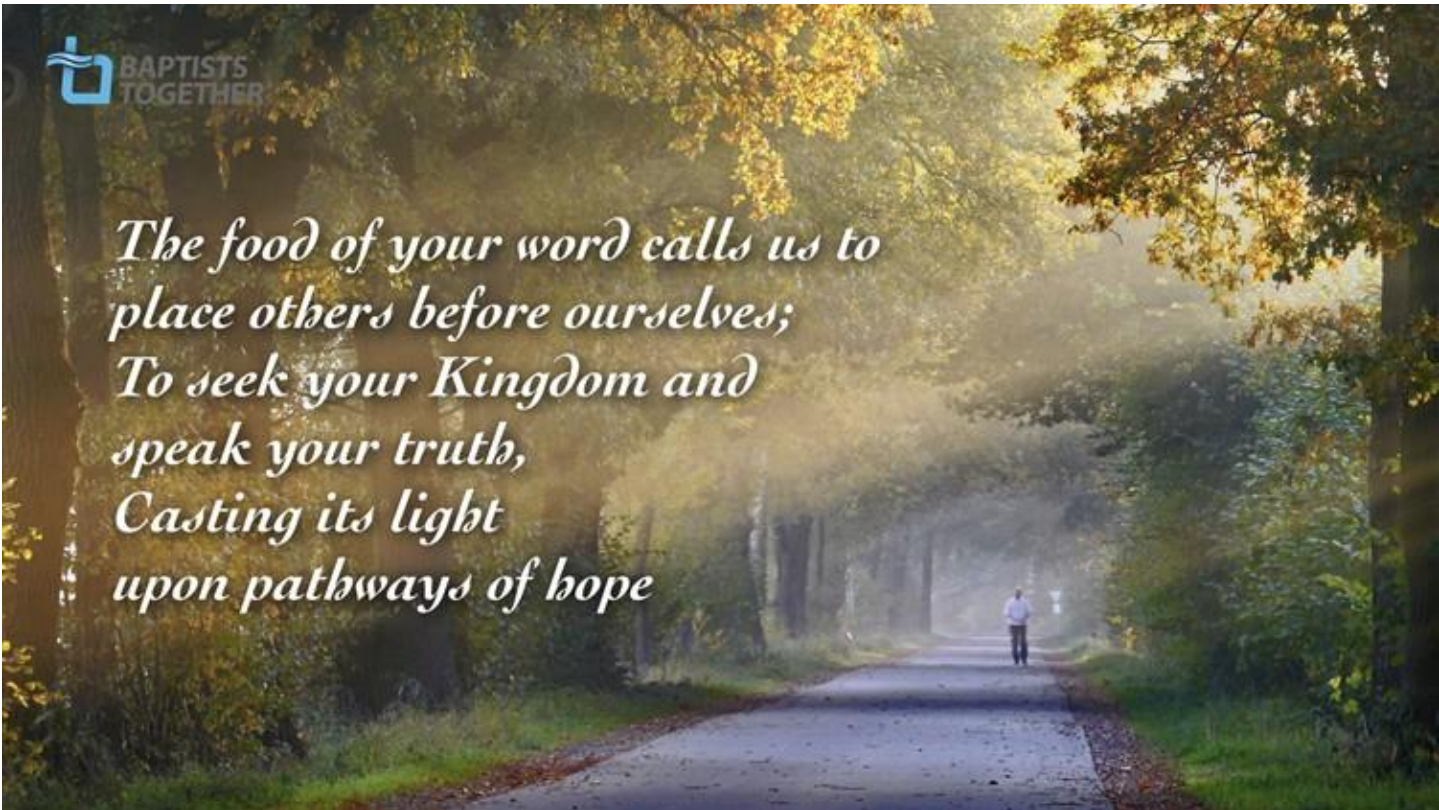


## Lent Sundays

Reflections for use on the five Sundays in Lent – originally written for Lent 2017 by Phil Jump, Regional Minister Team Leader for the North Western Baptist Association.

*The food of your word calls us to  
place others before ourselves;  
To seek your Kingdom and  
speak your truth,  
Casting its light  
upon pathways of hope*



## First Sunday in Lent – Tempted in the Desert

Lent is a season that is inspired and informed by the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness at the outset of his earthly ministry. Seeking to determine his purpose and vocation, he was tempted to pursue pathways that did not belong to the way of God's Kingdom.

Yet in those temptations there is more than an echo of the kind of religion that we can all too easily find ourselves pursuing. Lent is a time for us also to free ourselves of such inclinations, and be reminded again of their emphatic rejection.

*(If used in public worship, this reading might work best if two voices read alternate stanzas)*

Turn these stones into bread  
Grant us a faith where self is satisfied  
And tables are spread at which believers can dine  
With backs turned on a needy, hungry world

But bread alone will not sustain  
And the food of your word calls us to place others before ourselves;  
To seek your Kingdom and speak your truth,  
Casting its light upon pathways of hope.

Leap from the temple's highest tower  
Grant us a faith that thrills and entertains  
Where we can applaud and cheer for more  
To take our minds off the crosses that others may bear.

But you refuse the temptation of being shaped by our desires  
To willingly dance to tunes of our making.  
You call us to capture this world's attention  
With refrains of justice and acts of compassion.

Sign up to the agendas of the powers that be  
Grant us a faith that leaves their gods and idols unchallenged and undisturbed;  
That asks no questions of systems and structures  
That leave many behind, oppressed and forgotten

But you are the one we are called to enthrone  
Whose kingdom is founded on justice and right  
That nations might rejoice in the light of its coming  
And hope can echo when its cause is embraced.

## Second Sunday in Lent – I am God, your God (Psalm 50)

Lent is a time for deepening our relationship with God; to explore more fully the nature and purposes of our God. The desert is a place of stark emptiness; devoid of the trappings and distractions of more familiar environments. Therein lies the challenge of whether our routines of worship, prayer and activity have themselves become such trappings. To what degree are our perceptions of God constrained by the language and priorities we choose, leaving us blind to other aspects of his being?

Psalm 50 is one of many Scripture passages where expectant worshippers are left surprised by a God who refuses to wallow in the excesses of their worship rituals. Rather he calls his people to examine themselves, particularly in the light of his laws of justice and righteousness – to live out their worship in the every-day of life.

What might God be seeking to say to his people in the midst of today's world?

What aspects of God's nature and being do we need to re-claim and re-embrace in our life together?

You call us to be still – and in stillness know you more  
In the empty wilderness, there is no figure but yours  
No-one else on whom we can fix our attention,  
Nothing with which to busy ourselves, except your waiting presence.

Throne rooms and palaces are easy to prefer;  
Where the comforting distractions of frenzied activity,  
And the noise and clamour of well-intentioned adoration,  
Help us avoid the searing questions of your Kingdom's cause

And on our very doorsteps are many desert places  
Landscapes scarred by neglect and deprivation  
Lives parched and wearied by emptiness and longing  
Not as passing pilgrims but imprisoned by a climate that is cruel and unforgiving.

Dare we believe that if we stand in that desert  
Allow ourselves to be buffeted and scorched by its harsh extremes  
That there we might not only find you  
But see you in new light and discover more of who you are

For the God who has become one with us  
Chooses not to invite us to any palatial banquet  
Until we have walked with him in desert places  
Taking up our cross to follow in the pathways of self-denial.

So let our light shine in the places that others might avoid  
Let beacons of hope be kindled in places of despair  
May we not simply wait for desert dwellers to join our self-styled party  
But seek in their stories, new glimpses of who you are.

## Third Sunday in Lent – His hands have moulded the dry land (Psalm 95)

The popular perception of Lent is still one of a season in which we “give things up”, and the Jesus we meet in the wilderness has fasted for 40 days. Today, we might not simply explore the spiritual virtues of doing without, but recognise that our unhalted consumption is raising questions about the sustainability of our planet.

The desert landscape is a stark reminder of what can happen, even to fertile places when they are exploited and over-consumed. The discipline of fasting and sacrifice invites us to consider what we might manage to curtail on a more permanent basis. It invites us to remember that this earth is not ours, and we have no more claim on its resources than any other generation - past or future.

You call us to the desert  
And in its vast and barren landscape  
We recognise this earth’s true fragility  
When parched and hungry, we inhabit a land that cannot sustain us

Confronted by the emptiness of this scorched and ravaged place  
We learn to be thankful again for the bounty,  
That too lightly we dismiss as routine expectation,  
And recognise more deeply the sufficiency of knowing you.

Teach us to loosen our grasp  
On what the habits of privilege have taught us to call essential  
Set us free from the tyranny of consumption  
That even in the wilderness, contentment might be found.

For at the dawn of time  
You did not simply breathe out the life of your Spirit  
But breathed it into the dust of the earth  
We are yours; yet belong in, and are sustained by your creation.

And so we come to recognise  
How easily we have forgotten the privilege of being its guardians;  
The desert places become a stark foretaste  
Of what can become, and is becoming, when we neglect this planet’s care

You did not come to exploit and consume the resources of this world  
But to redeem and reclaim – to reconcile all things  
Pointing us to that full salvation, for which all creation groans  
Help us walk in its direction, casting the light of hope across this ravaged earth.

**Biblical challenge:** This week’s lent reflection builds on the words of Psalm 95, which depicts God as the one who is above and within all of creation. The Biblical narrative of creation gives central place to relationships. Genesis 2 shows us the relationships that God desires; with God; with each other; and with creation. Genesis 3 describes the ‘Fall’ through which human rebellion and the human desire to play God leads to a breaking of these relationships.

God’s first covenant is with the whole of creation (Genesis 8:22-9:17) Isaiah proclaims that breaking the covenant leads to the destruction of creation (Isaiah 24:4-5).

Jesus sums up the whole of the Law in two commands, to love God and to love neighbour (Matthew 22:37-40). What is Jesus calling us to do in repairing these relationships? Paul affirms that creation 'groans' as it waits for us to get our relationship with God fixed - to behave in a Christ-like way towards God's world (Romans 8:18-23).

Revelation 16-18 reveals that following the alternative lordship of power and wealth leads to the destruction of the environment and ultimately of our own lives. Who are we following? (Mark 8:34)

Many of these themes and realities echo through this week's lent reflection. But what practical steps can we take as churches and individuals to respond to its challenge?

Here are some ideas for you to consider:

Consider switching your electricity supplier to one that provides power from totally renewable resources through the Big Church Switch – to find out more visit

[http://www.tearfund.org/en/2016/02/the\\_big\\_church\\_switch/](http://www.tearfund.org/en/2016/02/the_big_church_switch/)

Conduct an Eco Church survey, which will help you to express God's care for the world through worship and mission - go to <http://ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/> to find out more.

Some papers that may help with further discussion are available from the John Ray Institute, these include: **Is Fracking good for us?** <http://www.jri.org.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/Weaver-JRI-Briefing-30.pdf>

**The Big Church Switch** <http://www.jri.org.uk/blog/the-big-church-switch-another-window-ofopportunity-by-rev-dr-john-weaver/>

**The Pope's welcome environmental contribution** <http://www.jri.org.uk/blog/the-popes-welcomeenvironmental-manifesto-rev-dr-john-weaver/>

## Fourth Sunday in Lent – If anyone would be my disciple . . . (Mark 8:34)

The call to deny ourselves is not only counter-cultural but counter-intuitive. It is our recognition of human rights and dignity that motivates and informs much of our commitment to social justice. How, in the light of this are we to understand Christ's call to self-denial?

Are we simply invited to passively accept those injustices that deny and undermine human dignity? Is the cross simply a symbol of quiet submission?

The Psalms speak of God fashioning our inmost being. As we pause to explore the person that God has made us to be, we might also recognise the identities and personas that this world can place upon us. These are identities that define borders, create barriers, measure worth, include some and leave others outside.

As we learn to leave these "selves" behind, so we discover more of our common humanity with those that some would define as "other". And so we become dissatisfied with a world that excludes and discriminates, that fabricates labels like "migrant" and "stranger"; where the needy are left without refuge when they fail to fit the moulds of acceptability and worth.

Who am I?  
What is this self that you call me to deny?  
Who are you calling us to become  
Amidst a world of identities and boundaries, personalities and status?

In the self we leave behind,  
Lie the trappings of a world that would press us into its mould;  
Imposing its narratives of difference and discrimination;  
Protecting interests that we have learned not to question.

But as we journey deeper  
Into the person you have made us to be,  
We discover in the face of each stranger,  
The shared hopes and common accord of a fellow traveller.

For your call to discipleship extends beyond our human boundaries  
Transcending the temporary divisions of this world  
And through the common journey that you call us all to follow  
Human need and dignity comes to matter more than borders.

In the solitude of the desert  
The stranger seeking refuge becomes a potential companion  
Their presence brings hope and the joy of shared humanity  
In every encounter, lives are enriched and threats diminish

So help us learn the lessons of self-denial  
And recognise that our places of plenty remain deserts for some  
Barren, cold and unwelcoming wildernesses of rejection  
Where beacons of hope can still be defiantly kindled.

## 5th Sunday in Lent - Grace, mercy and peace from God . . . . (2 John 1:3)

Our journey through lent is an opportunity for fresh encounters with God; to enlarge and deepen our vision of our Creator. But as we look again at the people we are, in the light of God's true nature, our own shortcomings become even more apparent.

Yet God does not leave us to wallow in a sense of unworthiness, but welcomes us with mercy and grace. His cross declares a measureless love, through which we find redemption and forgiveness.

This Gospel flies in the face of the cultures of blame that have become so commonplace in our world, where political capital can be gleaned through narratives of fear and suspicion. As those who have received grace, we are called to speak a different language, a language that makes grace known. Grace and mercy are powerful lenses in our Beacons of Hope.

As we are drawn more close to you,  
Your purity and holiness infuses each encounter.  
With lives laid bare in your presence,  
The contrast of our shortcomings becomes ever more clear.

Yet despite our disappointments,  
The failures and weaknesses of which we are all too aware,  
Yours is a face of welcome; your outstretched hand  
Reveals a grace beyond measure and human comprehension.

The crosses we carry reflect your own  
Beckoning us to that place where love outpoured  
Bore every injustice and the worst of our intent.  
Crying out, even amidst its deepest pain, for a Father's forgiveness.

But we cannot walk away unchanged;  
For those to whom grace has been extended,  
Can be its truest advocates amidst this unforgiving world.  
Peacemakers; reconcilers; determined that evil shall not repay evil.

The language of grace will outrage and disturb  
In a world that treats every stranger with suspicion  
That seeks to lay blame and demand retribution;  
That assumes the worst of those whose worth has yet to be proven.

We will not be consumed by these unholy narratives  
Nor shore up regimes that build themselves on hate.  
For guilt and shortcoming is humanity's common scar  
Grace and mercy their eternal conqueror.

*© Phil Jump, Regional Minister Team Leader, North Western Baptist Association*

Faith and Society Team, Baptist Union of Great Britain, Baptist House, PO Box 44, 129 Broadway, Didcot OX11 8RT  
Tel: 01235 517700 Email: [faithandsociety@baptist.org.uk](mailto:faithandsociety@baptist.org.uk) Website: [www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk)

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) is changing its legal status from a charitable unincorporated association to a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO). From 1 January 2020, BUGB will operate as a CIO with registered charity number 1181392.

Date of Issue: October 2017