

## Introduction to the Lenten Services

What is Lent? It mirrors the time Jesus spent in the wilderness, managing his calling and his own human ambitions. In it, we prepare ourselves once again to take on the challenges which Jesus sets us, and to accompany him through the trauma that awaits him in Jerusalem.

What we are doing and not doing this Lent? We are following the Circuit scheme of services and discussion evenings. However missing today are things which we will look at another time, notably, the temptation of Jesus (Mark 1:9-15).

## Call to Worship Job 38:1-20

- <sup>1</sup> Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:
- <sup>2</sup> “Who is this that obscures my plans  
with words without knowledge?
- <sup>3</sup> Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.
- <sup>4</sup> “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.
- <sup>5</sup> Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?
- <sup>6</sup> On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone—
- <sup>7</sup> while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?
- <sup>8</sup> “Who shut up the sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,  
<sup>9</sup> when I made the clouds its garment  
and wrapped it in thick darkness,  
<sup>10</sup> when I fixed limits for it  
and set its doors and bars in place,  
<sup>11</sup> when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther;  
here is where your proud waves halt’?
- <sup>12</sup> “Have you ever given orders to the morning,  
or shown the dawn its place,  
<sup>13</sup> that it might take the earth by the edges  
and shake the wicked out of it?
- <sup>14</sup> The earth takes shape like clay under a seal;  
its features stand out like those of a garment.
- <sup>15</sup> The wicked are denied their light,  
and their upraised arm is broken.
- <sup>16</sup> “Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
- <sup>17</sup> Have the gates of death been shown to you?  
Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness?
- <sup>18</sup> Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth?  
Tell me, if you know all this.
- <sup>19</sup> “What is the way to the abode of light?  
And where does darkness reside?
- <sup>20</sup> Can you take them to their places?  
Do you know the paths to their dwellings?

**HYMN StF 706 Longing for light** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BrpJw9yX6y0>

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| <p>1 Longing for light, we wait in darkness.<br/>Longing for truth, we turn to you.<br/>Make us your own, your holy people,<br/>light for the world to see.<br/><i>Christ, be our light !<br/>Shine in our hearts.<br/>Shine through the darkness.<br/>Christ, be our light !<br/>Shine in your Church gathered today.</i></p> <p>2 Longing for peace, our world is troubled.<br/>Longing for hope, many despair.<br/>Your word alone has power to save us.<br/>Make us your living voice.</p> | <p>3 Longing for food, many are hungry.<br/>Longing for water, many still thirst.<br/>Make us your bread, broken for others,<br/>shared until all are fed.</p> <p>4 Longing for shelter, many are homeless.<br/>Longing for warmth, many are cold.<br/>Make us your building, sheltering others,<br/>walls made of living stone.</p> <p>5 Many the gifts, many the people,<br/>many the hearts that yearn to belong.<br/>Let us be servants to one another,<br/>making your kingdom come.</p> |
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Bernadette Farrell (b.1957)

**Prayers of approach and confession**

O God, our true life, to know you is life, to serve you is freedom, to enjoy you is immense wealth; to worship you is our happiness. Hear us now as we come to you together in prayer.

God, you give us hope, you root us and makes us know the meaning in our lives, but give us one thing more: gratitude in our hearts for all you have done for us and created in us, gratitude today, when we meet to speak to you, but gratitude too that is spoken in all we do, gratitude that forms us and inspires all our relations with other people each and every day. May your kindness be our kindness; as you are our hope, may we give hope to others; as Jesus is our refuge, may we give refuge to those in need; as your Holy Spirit is our inspiration and protection, may we be inspired to show your light in our lives.

O God, your love for us is not in doubt; but we ask you to give us love for others; Love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing, and love in the hidden places of our hearts; love of those who find it hard to bear with us, love of those with whom we work, and love of those with whom we take our ease; forgive us where we have failed in the past, and guide us in the future, that so at length we may be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love.

*And now, we say the prayer Jesus himself taught us.*

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 for ever.  
Amen.

**Junior Church**

The Thwaite Debate: Thwaite thinks about his waistline and what to do about it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qon8eMeSFfg>

*James Allen introduces the Junior Church prayer and hymn*

**HYMN Be bold, be strong** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJPcs-pCVzs>

**Reading John 9:1-41**

Jesus heals a man born blind: an account of sight and light.

*With introduction by minister.*

<sup>1</sup> As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth.

<sup>2</sup> His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” <sup>3</sup> “Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus, “but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. <sup>4</sup> As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.

<sup>5</sup> While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” <sup>6</sup> After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man’s eyes.

*Commentary by minister*

<sup>7</sup> “Go,” he told him, “wash in the Pool of Siloam” (this word means “Sent”). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing. <sup>9</sup> His neighbours and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, “Isn’t this the same man who used to sit and beg?”

<sup>9</sup> Some claimed that he was. Others said, “No, he only looks like him.” But he himself insisted, “I am the man.”

<sup>10</sup> “How then were your eyes opened?” they asked.

<sup>11</sup> He replied, “The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see.”

<sup>12</sup> “Where is this man?” they asked him. “I don’t know,” he said.

*Commentary by minister*

<sup>13</sup> They brought to the Pharisees the man who had been blind. <sup>14</sup> Now the day on which Jesus had made the mud and opened the man’s eyes was a Sabbath.

<sup>15</sup> Therefore the Pharisees also asked him how he had received his sight. “He put mud on my eyes,” the man replied, “and I washed, and now I see.”

<sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, “This man is not from God, for he does not keep the Sabbath.” But others asked, “How can a sinner perform such signs?” So they were divided.

<sup>17</sup> Then they turned again to the blind man, “What have you to say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” The man replied, “He is a prophet.” <sup>18</sup> They still did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they sent for the man’s parents.

<sup>19</sup> “Is this your son?” they asked. “Is this the one you say was born blind? How is it that now he can see?” <sup>20</sup> “We know he is our son,” the parents answered, “and we know he was born blind.

<sup>21</sup> But how he can see now, or who opened his eyes, we don’t know. Ask him. He is of age; he will speak for himself.” <sup>22</sup> His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders, who already had decided that anyone who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.

<sup>23</sup> That was why his parents said, “He is of age; ask him.”

<sup>24</sup> A second time they summoned the man who had been blind. “Give glory to God by telling the truth,” they said. “We know this man is a sinner.”

<sup>25</sup> He replied, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”

<sup>26</sup> Then they asked him, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

<sup>27</sup> He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" <sup>28</sup> Then they hurled insults at him and said, "You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!

<sup>29</sup> We know that God spoke to Moses, but as for this fellow, we don't even know where he comes from." <sup>30</sup> The man answered, "Now that is remarkable! You don't know where he comes from, yet he opened my eyes. <sup>31</sup> We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will. <sup>32</sup> Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

<sup>33</sup> If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

<sup>34</sup> To this they replied, "You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!" And they threw him out.

### *Commentary by minister*

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?"

<sup>36</sup> "Who is he, sir?" the man asked. "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, "You have now seen him; in fact, he is the one speaking with you."

<sup>38</sup> Then the man said, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped him.

<sup>39</sup> Jesus said, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind."

<sup>40</sup> Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" <sup>41</sup> Jesus said, "If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains."

### *Conclusions by minister*

**HYMN StF 139** Today I awake <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rNfBKSiz4zY>

1 Today I awake  
and God is before me.  
At night, as I dreamt,  
he summoned the day ;  
for God never sleeps  
but patterns the morning  
with slithers of gold  
or glory in grey.

2 Today I arise  
and Christ is beside me.  
He walked through the dark  
to scatter new light.  
Yes, Christ is alive,  
and beckons his people  
to hope and to heal,  
resist, and invite.

3 Today I affirm  
the Spirit within me  
at worship and work,  
in struggle and rest.  
The Spirit inspires  
all life which is changing  
from fearing to faith,  
from broken to blest.

4 Today I enjoy  
the Trinity round me,  
above and beneath,  
before and behind ;  
the Maker, the Son,  
the Spirit together —  
they called me to life  
and call me their friend.

John L. Bell (b.1949) and Graham Maule (1958-2019)

## **Sermon Saying 'Yes' to Life**

I know that I can rely on you to be familiar with that opening section of Genesis, in which God's creation of the world is described in terms of construction from a mass of formless, chaotic raw material. God brings order; he divides, separates and limits the scope of the base

elements, and what results is a viable, comprehensive system designed to support life. God works day by day, and we can regard these days as phases of development. His primary act is to bring light, which is defined over against darkness. Light is the thing that enables God's project, and God manages it so that it produces, in order, growth, plants, and then countless living creatures which fill the seas and the sky. And God sees that all this is good, that is, he validates it and blesses its existence and its increase. He populates the earth with animals of all kinds, both those that will be useful to man, and those that will hinder man, like reptiles. Then, and only then, he produced man, and put man in charge of the earth, ruling over the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and so the whole of creation was there as a benefit and as a responsibility for man.

But, this morning, instead of pressing on to the Garden of Eden, we shall pause and consider light. Light, which in Genesis, is the decisive move towards a living world, and which in the Gospels has a meaning which has evolved: the light of the world, the light that we live by, that illuminates the meaning of life and guides us into making good choices as to how we are to live. This is the journey from creation to salvation.

It's true in human communication generally that light is a universal symbol for life itself and for understanding. In the Bible, there are nearly two hundred references, all of them somewhere along the spectrum of meaning. Whereas in the pagan world, the sources of light were seen as gods – the sun, moon and stars. But in the Bible, they are works of God's creation. We see this in Psalm 148; "Him glorify sun moon and stars; ye higher spheres and cloudy sky." Unlike pagans, we are not invited to worship the vehicles of light, the things that bring light to us, but instead to appreciate the divine intelligence and vision which caused them to be created.

Light exists in relation to darkness. The ancient mind was mystified by where light comes from, where it is kept, and how it is poured out. We heard about this in the reading from Job at the start of this service<sup>1</sup>. In a scientific age, we might point to all sorts of measuring devices and say, "there you are, there is no light at all", or, perhaps "there is some numerically-defined intermediate level of light", but to the human mind, and especially the ancient human mind, light exists in contrast. If everything were light, we would not be able to read and understand situations, any more than if everything were dark. White letters on a white background are not readable. But in the world we inhabit, there is nearly always an interplay of light and dark, and humans strive towards the light as moths do in a dark room. Light enables us to work, but when it grows dark, we can do no work<sup>2</sup>; to have a source of light and then to conceal it (under a basket) is an exercise in futility<sup>3</sup>. Job talks about deposed rulers who grope around in the darkness<sup>4</sup>, and in Exodus, we read of the Egyptians being made to live in "darkness that can be felt"<sup>5</sup>, whilst the Israelites continued in the light. A physical darkness is described, but it would be fair to say, I think, that the Israelites were living in the light of God, whilst the Egyptians were not.

What God brings to his people is his light. They become children of the light, though they can reject this, as Job did in his despair. He had every misfortune inflicted on him, yet believed that he had lived well, and did not deserve such a fate. This is what he says:

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<sup>1</sup> Job 38:1-20

<sup>2</sup> John 9:4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:15

<sup>4</sup> Job 12:25

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 10:23

“Perish the day when I was born, and the night which said, “a man is conceived”. May that day turn to darkness, may God above not look for it, nor light of dawn shine on it. May blackness sully it, and murk and gloom, cloud smother that day, swift darkness eclipse its sun. Blind darkness swallow up that night...may it be barren for ever”.<sup>6</sup>

This is not just about obliterating the physical light of day, but also the light which is a symbol of goodness and blessing. Job, in his misery, wants to obliterate the blessing within which he is deemed to live, because the blessing has turned sour. He seeks an end to his pain in the anonymity of black-on-black in outer darkness. And God says, “Who is this whose ignorant words cloud my design in darkness? Brace yourself, and stand up like a man”. “Because you cannot understand my purposes, you must submit to them, and not rebel even in a passive way, through despair.” And Job repents.

Light in the world is therefore at God’s will and his command. It is not optional to have it or to reject it. But how can we understand it or respond to it positively and productively? It is Jesus who provides an answer to this baffling question, and a way forward, so that the despair which affected Job can be avoided.

In John 9, in the reading which we heard this morning, Jesus declares he is the light of the world. That is, he provides a viable environment for those who seek to do God’s work. He does this for the time being, whilst he is present on earth. He does this in the context of a man blind from birth, who wishes to be cured. Like Job, this man is surrounded by an apparent injustice. There is a debate as to whether he is blind because he himself sinned, or because his parents did so. This baffling situation is similar to that which afflicted Job, and Jesus’s answer is similar in content, though not in tone, to that which God gave Job. God’s purposes are to be revealed. The man was made blind so that he could be cured. Light will break through darkness.

Jesus’s critics, though, groping in a sort of spiritual darkness, latch onto details to which they can relate. Firstly, Jesus worked (that is, healed) on the Sabbath, which is forbidden. Next, the blind man is by definition sinful, because he was born blind.

The great sin of the Pharisees was to claim that they could ‘see’, that is, that they had insight to what was sinful and what was not; in their scale of correctness, healing was given a negative rather than a positive status because of category issue (‘born a sinner’) and procedural irregularities (healed on the Sabbath). They saw a murky unsafe situation, in which they should reject everything and everyone who did not seem to be proper. Jesus said, I come to bring sight to the sightless, and to confound those who claim to see but do not, and wish to use their power to withhold healing.

One man’s light is another’s murky situation. Human wisdom sometimes mistakes one for the other. Light comes out of darkness unexpectedly, but when it does so, it may be with great force.<sup>7</sup>

The interplay of light and darkness that Jesus experienced in his time in the wilderness, which is reflected in Lent, is difficult and impossible to understand without the help that Jesus gives us. As Ruth Valerio says, “Jesus comes to bring light to everyone who will receive it”. We are now in preparation for just that.

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<sup>6</sup> Job 3:3-7

<sup>7</sup> As in the painting by Caravaggio. See this dark scene of the moment when the disciples recognize Jesus in the supper at Emmaus below

**HYMN StF 728** O God, you search me and you know me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZD7ZTCE1CE>

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| <p>1. O God, you search me and you know me,<br/>all my thoughts lie open to your gaze.<br/>When I walk or lie down you are before me:<br/>ever the maker and keeper of my days.</p> <p>2. You know my resting and my rising.<br/>You discern my purpose from afar,<br/>and with love everlasting you besiege me:<br/>in every moment of life or death, you are.</p> <p>3. Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,<br/>you have known it's meaning through and through.<br/>You are with me beyond my understanding:<br/>God of my present, my past and future too.</p> | <p>4. Although your spirit is upon me,<br/>still I search for shelter from your light,<br/>there is nowhere on earth I can escape you:<br/>even the darkness is radiant in your light.</p> <p>5. For you have created me and shaped me,<br/>gave me life within my mother's womb.<br/>For the wonder of who I am, I praise you:<br/>safe in your hands, all creation is made new.</p> |
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Bernadette Farrell

**Prayers for Others**

Holy God, let us look with you at all who suffer today;

The sick, the deaf, the blind

Victims of violence, prisoners, psychiatric patients

The lonely, the aged, the hungry, those who suffer discrimination

Those who are afraid, or cannot rest

People who once had the peace we enjoy, but who have it no more.

Those who hate themselves, and can see no love in the world.

Those for whom your world has lost its glory, and is worthless,

for whom life is a chore, its beauties gone, like leaves in the wind.

Let us, who count ourselves your people, let us hollow a space within us, and take into it the suffering people of the world.

*We name them in the prayers we share*

Holy God, open our hearts to them and make us aware of them.

Let the compassion of Jesus be in us to welcome them.

May someone they meet today show that there is light, that the struggle is worth it. Let your people in their lives speak of God to those who have lost hope.

Make us, and all who love You, a living network, give us the instinct, the will and the spark to do your work. Let your world be touched and healed, and where your people can help in this, give them the grace to do so, and to bring alive again your Spirit in those who suffer. May they feel your blessing.

Through Jesus Christ Our Lord

Amen

**HYMN StF55 Immortal, invisible** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Df-WYr7sGlo>

- 1 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.
- 2 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,  
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might —  
thy justice like mountains high soaring above  
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.
- 3 To all life thou givest, to both great and small ;  
in all life thou livest, the true life of all ;  
we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,  
and wither and perish ; but naught changeth thee.
- 4 Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,  
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight ;  
all praise we would render : O help us to see  
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.
- 5 Immortal, invisible, God only wise,  
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,  
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,  
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Walter Chalmers Smith (1824–1908)

**Blessing**

The love of the Lord Jesus draw you to himself,  
The power of the Lord Jesus strengthen you in his service,  
The joy of the Lord Jesus fill your hearts;  
And the blessing of God Almighty,  
The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,  
Be among you and remain with you always.  
*Amen*

