

# Ash Wednesday

## Sermon Notes:

Joel 2:1-2; 12-17 or  
Isaiah 58:1-12

Psalms 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Matthew 6:1-6 (7-15),  
16-21

### Isaiah Reading

Encourage hearers to embrace the wider vision of Lent as a time to take up, rather than just give up. Present examples of how a fast of choice can be about doing something proactive and positive for the benefit of others. Are there people we can free who may be bound through loneliness, rejection or fear. What is the 'fast' I choose this Lent?

### 2 Corinthians Reading

Consider how hearers may prayerfully discern opportunities to be ambassadors for Christ, to work for reconciliation and identify the right time to bring it about. Present some contemporary examples of the barriers to salvation in the reading which affect our lives today. Can such barriers be addressed in spite of the feeling that we may have nothing to offer?

### Matthew Reading

Develop a link with the Isaiah 58 vision and the traditional Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Consider how the secrecy commended in the reading can be expressed through mutual ministry, where the service becomes invisible through the mutuality of giving and receiving. Invite hearers to discern what is their 'heart' and 'treasure' in their life and ministry during the season of Lent.



# First Sunday in Lent

## Sermon Notes:

Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7

Psalms 32

Romans 5:12-19

Matthew 4:1-11

### Genesis Reading

Focus on a particular area of human knowledge (for example health research, energy production, welfare practice, economic theory) and reflect how this enterprise has the potential to do both good and harm. Identify how a deeper understanding may lead to new ways forward.

### Romans Reading

Explore how the free gift of God's grace is evident in the community of faith and the wider community. Encourage hearers to consider how this free gift of grace can apply to the Lenten disciplines of almsgiving, prayer and fasting. Encourage hearers to consider how this free gift of grace may be shared with others as well as experienced ourselves.

### Matthew Reading

Consider some contemporary parallels to the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness, including examples of the desire for 'quick fix' solutions; how God's grace is being put to the test; and how people struggle to maintain power and control.

Explore the significance of the Spirit driving Jesus into the wilderness. To what extent and in what ways might the Spirit be urging us to go into the wilderness in our personal lives, in our wider society and the Christian Church?

### Linking Genesis and Matthew

Explore the linkage between the attributes of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (good for food; a delight to the eye; making one wise) and the temptations faced by Jesus in the wilderness (stones to bread; putting God to the test; exercising power and control).

# Second Sunday

## in Lent

### Sermon Notes:

Genesis 12:1-4a

Psalms 121

Romans 4:1-5 (6-12)  
13-17

John 3:1-17 or  
Matthew 17:1-9

- This passage from John Chapter three, describing the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus, a teacher and Pharisee, is one of the best known and most widely quoted in the Gospels. The alternative reading is the familiar story of the transfiguration of Jesus witnessed by Peter, James and John. Both stories gently guide the reader through a process beginning with inquisitiveness and questioning that leads to a more intentional seeking and searching for truth, which then culminates in the moment of revelation.
- Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. Perhaps this is symbolic [of light and darkness] or perhaps Nicodemus is afraid of his peers. Perhaps he just wants to be anonymous. Whatever is the case, Nicodemus is clearly a seeker of spiritual truth, drawn to Jesus. Most people ask spiritual questions and so become spiritual seekers at some point in their lives. Indeed for many people, such a quest is a life-long one.
- The spiritual truth proclaimed by Jesus is difficult for Nicodemus to accept: “how can these things be?”  
At first hearing the heavenly things proclaimed by this new teacher seem impossible. Often spiritual truth is hard to hear.
- Nicodemus persists in asking How and Why questions that are important but have no clear and definitive answer. In response Jesus speaks, somewhat esoterically, of being “born from above” and of the wind “blowing wherever it pleases”. Sometimes the answers can be just as hard as the questions [eg: God’s answer to Job in Job 38]
- Jesus brings the dialogue with Nicodemus to a close by revisiting the sacred stories shared by Nicodemus and himself – that of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. In the Torah, all who look to the serpent are made whole [saved]. Stories are often a rich source of guidance and truth.
- Whether the concluding two verses [vv 16-17] are intended as an editorial note inserted by the Evangelist, or the continuing speech of Jesus, is much debated [the Greek lacks punctuation].  
They provide some of the most concise and far reaching theological statements in the Gospels – that God so loved the world that He gave His Son not to condemn but to save the world.
- In times past, God called faithful men and women, such as Abraham and Sarah to trust and follow him. Leaving their livelihoods and homes they obeyed and became great and enduring examples of faith. Through the story of the encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus calls us to new life, new faith, and to new ways of knowing and obeying Him, by being born from above [or anew] in all manner of ways. In the season of Lent, Christians are called to new ways of seeking and serving God in their daily lives.



# Third Sunday

## in Lent



### Sermon Notes:

Exodus 17:1-7

Psalms 95

Romans 5:1-11

John 4:5-42

- Exchange between the Samaritan woman and Jesus parallels that between Nicodemus and Jesus: slow movement from spiritual blindness to sight.
- Several plays on words, double meanings used as a device to explore the life-giving role Jesus has in the life of the believer.
- The exchange is both Christological and evangelistic.
- Jesus ignores the age old traditions that prevent a Jew speaking with and receiving from a Samaritan, and of a man speaking with an unknown woman.
- Transition in the woman's perception of Jesus. Jesus needs a drink but the woman has the bucket.

The woman is defensive, she expects to be derided by Jesus a Jew, because of the antipathy between Jews and Samaritans. When he says if she knew who He was, she would be asking for water, Jesus – uses word play on running and living water.

- Woman asks Jesus for water expecting drinking water, Jesus offers LIFE not water.
- Jesus sees into the woman's life [compare Nathaniel]. She accepts him as a prophet [movement from “you” to “sir” to “prophet” then “Messiah”].
- How does the life of the Samaritan woman compare with ours? Is our faith dry and joyless like that of the woman?
- Are our worship practices lifeless or living?
- Is our faith a true commitment or merely an assent to particular doctrines about Jesus?
- What about our relationships with God? How are they reflected in our relationships with others?
- Are we personally conduits for God's living water or is our tank dry?

# Fourth Sunday

## in Lent



### Sermon Notes:

1 Samuel 16:1-13

Psalm 23

Ephesians 5:8-14

John 9:1-41

The critical themes of the gospel are sight and blindness. They could be explored more broadly but the length and drama of the reading suggest a sermon focussed on the teaching within the reading. The respective sight/blindness of the key actors is worth exploration in relation to our own sight/blindness.

There are five key actors – the man born blind, the disciples, the crowd, the Jews and the Pharisees, Jesus.

All five could be considered in a sermon, but the contrast between the man born blind [no choice] and those who have become blind [by choice] is the sharpest.

#### **The man born blind**

- Cast as a sinner because of his physical disability.
- Fringe dweller, vulnerable, outcast, dismissed as irrelevant.
- Open to the possibilities presented by Jesus.
- Receives physical sight, perseveres and receives spiritual sight.
- One of the few in the gospel to perceive who Jesus is.
- The man born blind [no choice] becomes the one who truly sees [by choice].

Who are the fringe dwellers around us?

What might they be saying to our own spiritual blindness?

When are we vulnerable? Do we let God speak to us ?

Are we prepared to encounter God who walks at the margins? Are we prepared to choose such a God?

#### **The Pharisees and the Jews**

- Organised, legalistic, inquisitorial
- More concerned with the letter than the spirit of the law
- Prepared to make judgement and to ostracise
- The 'Church' of their day
- Blind from beginning to end


Who are the Pharisees? Where do we find them?

Is this fundamentalism? What does this say to the church of our time?

Does our human need for structure and certainty sometimes deprive us of seeing God?

Are we prepared to welcome, know and even learn from/through those who dwell on the fringes?

Lent is a time to repent of blindness and find our sight, our imperfections as 'Church'.



# Fifth Sunday

## in Lent

### Sermon Notes:

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

- The raising of Lazarus occurs at a vital juncture in the narrative of John's Gospel. Until now the story has been concerned with how Jesus encounters and renews the various festivals and institutions of Judaism. The story now edges closer and closer to Jerusalem, where it will crystallise with the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. In this long passage from John Chapter 11, a friend of Jesus, Lazarus, who has died, is miraculously restored to life.
- The chapter is concerned with the very human themes of life and death. The raising of Lazarus, as stupendous as the miracle is, foreshadows the greater miracle of the raising of Jesus himself, and of his power to transform everything, even death itself. There is a strong Easter message of hope that remains powerful and relevant today [the sentence from John 11:25 has been read at Christian funerals for centuries].
- The miracle is the greatest of Jesus signs and culminates with the most definitive and bold of the "I am" statements – "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE". Not even death will overcome this. Long after we are gone, the proclamation of Jesus will continue.
- In this story we witness a very human Jesus, who experiences the loss of his friend Lazarus, and shares in the very human phenomenon of the grief brought about by that loss. This passage calls to mind the prayer of the Iona Community – 'blessed is our brother Jesus, who walks with us on the road of human suffering and despair'.
- The raising of Lazarus is a miracle, that also functions in a parabolic way, foreshadowing the death and resurrection of Jesus himself. Other applications may be relevant – such as the transforming of situations of despair through the words and works of hope proclaimed here in John Chapter 11.
- Like Jesus, the church is not content with death. Every generation of believers must be willing to speak words of life, love and hope, into the world around them, and to stand before the many 'graves' in our world, our community, our church, even ourselves and shout – Lazarus come forth!

# Sunday of the Passion

(Palm Sunday)

## Sermon Notes:

### Liturgy of the Passion

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 31:9-18

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 26:14 to 27:66  
or Matthew 27:11-54

- Consider the struggle within Jesus as he accepted his calling from God to suffer, even as he knew he had a choice. How do we listen and hear God's call to us? Do we try to avoid suffering?
- Jesus "set his face like flint" although he knew he would face humiliation and death. He held to his beliefs in the face of political and religious opposition. What might this story tell us about our own church in Australia in the 21st century?
- When Judas repented and returned the thirty pieces of silver, the elders said 'see to it yourself'. Likewise when Pilate saw that the crowds were being stirred to rebellion he washed his hands and said 'see to it yourselves'. The religious and political leaders disavowed any responsibility for the killing of an innocent man. Where do we find ourselves in this story? Whose side would we have been on?
- Paul noted that Jesus humbled himself to take on the form of humanity, and was obedient even to death. What place does obedience have in our lives today?
- The ultimate point of the passion is that we are forgiven. God loves us to the extent that he would suffer and die for us, and this gift is given freely to us. This week we will watch with those at the foot of the cross, mourn with the disciples who watched the body placed in the tomb, be uncertain like the followers of Jesus who had lost their leader. However, we are people of the Resurrection. God's Passion is our inspiration to live changed lives. What does this mean for us today?





# Sunday of the Passion

## (Palm Sunday)

### Sermon Notes:

#### Liturgy of the Palms

Matthew 21:1-11

Psalms 118:1-2, 19-29

- Read Zechariah 9:9 and Isaiah 62:11, and consider the parallels with Jesus' Ministry. Matthew considers that the ancient prophecies were fulfilled in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.
- There is a disparity between Jesus' popularity with his followers, and the response of the religious leaders. Consider the way in which many people think politics and religion should be kept separate.
- Consider how Jesus 'stage manages' his entry into Jerusalem to make a statement about what kind of Messiah he will be. Compare this with the expectations of the people. Consider the importance of the entry and its links with the great work achieved by the crucifixion.
- For storytellers: the entry from the viewpoint of the donkey – being chosen and sought out by Jesus for this work. Our journey, The journey of the ordinary beginning when sought and made part of God's work.

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