



Welcome

You are very welcome to this online Ash Wednesday service for St Paul's URC and South Croydon United Church.

Opening Music – ‘Miserere mei, Deus’ by Gregorio Allegri
sung by *Tenebrae*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3v9unphfi0>

*Have mercy upon me, O God: after Thy great goodness.
According to the multitude of Thy mercies, do away mine offences.
Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin.*

Ash Wednesday is that time of the year when we see folk going about their daily lives, but with a smudged cross on their foreheads. I've had many a strange look as I walk down the street after attending an 'ashing' service.

Unsurprisingly, this year will be very different. Ashing will be impossible with social distancing – I fear even the Pope's suggestion of sprinkling ashes on each other's heads, will not be terribly popular.

So, we will find a different way of marking ourselves with a cross during this online service.

We begin with a simple version of that well-known Lenten Carol (yes, Lent has carols too!), 'Forty days and forty nights':

'Forty days and forty nights'

Forty days and forty nights
you were fasting in the wild.
Forty days and forty nights
tempted, and yet undefiled.

Shall not we your sorrow share
and from worldly joys abstain.
Fasting with unceasing prayer,
strong with you to suffer pain?

Then if Satan on us press,
flesh or spirit to assail,
victor in the wilderness,
grant we may not faint nor fail

So, shall we have peace divine:
holier gladness ours shall be.
Round us, too, shall angels shine,
such as served you faithfully.

Keep, O Keep us saviour dear,
ever constant by your side.
That with you we may appear,
at the eternal Eastertide.

Words: George H Smyttan, 1822-1870

Music: melody attr. to Martin Herbst, 1654-1681

Sung by Chris Brunelle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Ub2iuc98zw>

Welcome Prayer

Lenten God, we begin our journey together, all be it in our own homes and space, which you make sacred – and we remember your presence.

(a candle is lit)

We renew our deep connectedness with each other and with all creation.

May we be encouraged to spend the next 40 days intentionally aware of how our everyday actions affect each other, our world and ourselves.

May we journey with Jesus

who went to the wilderness and knows our wildernesses;

who went to the cross and who knows our crosses

who brings new life, knowing our need of it. AMEN

HERE IS GOD'S WORD

¹² And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Mark 1: 12-13 (NRSV)

That reading from Mark reminds us that there are places on earth that are such a challenge to live or even travel through – that it really is a matter of life and death. Places of the extremes – like severe heat or acute cold.

Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent – a time when we recognise and admit that we know those desert-wilderness phases in our own lives: times of extremes - grief, illness, broken relationships, money worries, fear about large global issues, and yes – our more

than 40 days in various covid-related restrictions are also wilderness experiences for us.

We know that deserts challenge us, but they can also help us to develop the skills and abilities we need to adapt and flourish, even in those hardest of times.

If we had the choice, none of us would choose these extremes – but perhaps the word ‘extremes’ isn’t helpful, because no human life is a nice straight line from birth to death, but a very bumpy, rollercoaster through all terrains: green pastures by still pools and wilderness that threatens us. Such is life – all life – the extremes are our lives.

Both can harm or help us to flourish.

Green pastures can refresh us, but a life of ease will eventually become a cage that limits our growth.

The wilderness can overwhelm and threaten our safety – causing us to bury our heads in its sand in the hope it will simply pass, but a struggle to adapt can prompt us to develop, cope, even flourish. And we’ve seen that at play during the pandemic – the immediate need to adapt causes a mixture of hoping it will all go away and the ability to cope and even flourish.

On Ash Wednesday, we are invited into the wilderness with Christ for 40 days – sounds great doesn’t it? But think of it this way, as hymn writer Paul Wood puts it:

*You call us to the wilderness
to concentrate the mind
on letting go of many things
that stifle humankind.*

In solitude with Jesus, we concentrate our minds – we will expect to struggle with temptations and demons, yet also to deepen in prayer and be ministered to by angels along the way. We will learn again that God is with us in our wildernesses, helping us to let go of all those things that stifle us.

Although this is a personal journey, we cannot survive the desert without the support of others – so we journey together – aware that each of us face wilderness in our own lives and would value the support of each other; the support of those who have come through and those still struggling.

We enter this Lenten wilderness, with God, with each other and with a mark of the cross on our heads as a reminder that Christ has been where we tread and shows us the way through.

Prayer: 'To you we shall return' by Jan Sutch Pickard

*Mysterious God, morning, noon and night
reveal your creative power;
even as we face life's joy and desert-tested pain
around us the whole earth cries glory.
Your presence beats in our blood, children of creation!*

*Yet we go on our way deaf to the larks above the track,
Looking down into the mud and not up into the clear sky.
And even then, we miss the myriad small signs of hope:
The crocus opening its heart to the sun,
Colours of sea-washed stones, rainbows in the mist.*

*We despair so easily. Our resilience drained.
We say: 'where is God in all this?'
And we deny it has any meaning. We say: God is dead'*

*We cannot find or feel the pulse of your life in us.
We put our shaky faith in things we have made,
We give cringing power to institutions.
We give up on ourselves, saying 'We are no good'.
We live in a way that says: 'There is no God.'
And the song of creation turns to dust and ashes on our lips.
Forgive us.
Dust we are – and to dust we shall return.*

*But in Jesus, you chose to share our human frailty,
To enter into our mortality in all its mystery,
To redeem this handful of dust.
We are yours - and to you we shall return. Amen*

The Ashing

'You are dust and to dust you shall return'.

Words we know from Genesis 3:19 and from each funeral service we have attended.

Ashes are used in the Bible to express grief and sorrow for our sins, but also to show that Christ claims us in love and endless mercy.

We cannot use ashes today, but we will use the same prayer as if we were. When the time comes, I invite you to use a pen or pencil – or charcoal – something to mark a cross on your own forehead (or perhaps on your hand, if you'd prefer).

Let us pray:

Lord God,

These ashes were once a palm tree bending in the wind,

They were fashioned into a cross shaped branch as we waved our
king home with shouts of Hosanna!
And after jeers of hate and 'kill him', the cross became your home.
The palm now burnt
Is lifeless
Dry and for all the world, is dead.

But mixed with oil and water,
This dead earth makes good fertiliser,
It will bring new life
It will burst from its tomb,
It will bring forth fruit
And a harvest of justice, peace and generosity.

Creating God, these are ashes worth wearing,
Symbol of earth
Symbol of mortality
Symbol of new life and hope.
May we accept this gift
And be blessed. AMEN

If we wish, we mark ourselves with the cross, saying:

'You are dust and to dust you shall return'

(silence)

Lord, we are not perfect;
perhaps 'work in progress' more properly defines us,
as you daily shape the clay from which we are formed
and gradually transform us.
We are yours and you are ours. Amen

'You call us to the wilderness'

You call us to the wilderness,
an empty, barren land.
The challenge is to break away
and then to trust your hand.
You call us to the wilderness
to concentrate the mind
on letting go of many things
that stifle humankind.

You call us to the wilderness
but all we see is loss:
for it's a challenge to believe
the "power" of the cross.
You call us to the wilderness
to show a stronger way:
that power only has effect
when weakness wins the day.

You call us from the wilderness
and emptiness gives way,
enlivened by your Spirit's breath,
returning to the day.
You call us from the wilderness
to diff'rent barren lands
to breathe the message of the cross
for other empty hands.

*Words: © 2015, Paul Wood and Ian Worsfold
'Kingsfold' played by Michael T. C. Hey, St Patrick's Cathedral*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0VmpNq4IDg>

Blessing

Blessed is the Cross, that gives way to an open tomb
Blessed is the night that gives way to day
Blessed in the wilderness that prompts adaptation
Blessed is the dust that awakens in spring

We go our way, giving thanks for this season of Lent
40 God-given days are ours and they will transform our lives.
So be it. Amen.

Closing Music – ‘Miserere mei, Deus’ by Gregorio Allegri
sung by Tenebrae
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3v9unphf0>

*Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.
Cast me not away from Thy presence: and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.
O give me the comfort of Thy help again:
and stablish me with Thy free Spirit.*