

## Wednesday March 17 St. Patrick's Day

### Luke 4:1-13 – starting as He means to go on

1 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, 2 where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

3 The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

4 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'"

5 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world.

6 And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.

7 So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

8 Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

9 The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here.

10 For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully;

11 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

12 Jesus answered, "It says: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Today I invite you to continue journeying with me through Lent 2021. We've stopped on the way to look at a number of landmarks; LAMENT, FEAR, REPENTANCE and THANKSGIVING. Now another one; PERSEVERANCE. When I was preparing to write these reflections, I had forgotten that PERSEVERANCE is also the name of the rover which is now on the surface of Mars, beginning its exploration of the enormous crater where it touched down on February 18. I love the names of some of the other probes that are on the Red Planet. One of them is *Curiosity*; launched in November 2011, it landed the following August and is still at work, thanks to its solar powered batteries, nine years later. No wonder the latest arrival is called *Perseverance*!

So why choose this theme for the next few days? Well, we've had to persevere for a whole year now. Day after day, week after week, we've been keeping our distance, washing our hands, wearing our masks, and so forth. We may have to keep doing these things for more months to come, vaccines notwithstanding. Remember, it's not just about protecting ourselves; if we keep doing these things, we keep protecting other people as well. So, says Paul in his letter to the Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." In other words, PERSEVERANCE.

On this Saint Patrick's Day I find the same staying power in the ministry of Patrick. In his *Confessio* he looks back over his long ministry on this island, and he writes:

"I didn't deserve at all that the Lord would grant such great grace, after hardships and troubles, after captivity, and after so many years among that people. It was something which, when I was young, I never hoped for or even thought of. "

One final point. Back on the first Sunday of Lent, the gospel reading included Mark's brief mention of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew and Luke in their gospels tell us in detail what those temptations were. But today, let's remember also how Luke's version ends: "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time." (4:13). Ah, "... until an opportune time". In other words, to quote Arnold Schwarzenegger, "I'll be back!" Read the gospels again, and see all the obstacles, trials and temptations thrown in Jesus' path. But he persevered to the end. And then, on the cross, he broke down the barrier that separates sinful human beings from a holy Creator. When he cried out "It is finished!" it was not a cry of despair: it was a cry of "Mission accomplished".

## **Thursday March 18 Daniel 9:1-3, 18-23- keep praying**

**1** In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom—

**2** in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.

**3** So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes.

**18** Give ear, O God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.

**19** O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.”

**20** While I was speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel and making my request to the LORD my God for his holy hill—

**21** while I was still in prayer, Gabriel, the man I had seen in the earlier vision, came to me in swift flight about the time of the evening sacrifice.

**22** He instructed me and said to me, “Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding.

**23** As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed.

One of the things we stop doing when we're discouraged is pray. Some years ago I conducted the funeral of an old lady, not a churchgoer but whom I knew from visiting her in her home. She had given up on prayer, and even on faith itself, because of what she had seen in the news day after day, year after year. Jesus knew well that this temptation would threaten to overwhelm his disciples. Luke's Gospel chapter 18 records a story he told of a persistent widow who got an unwilling judge to grant her justice by her constant pestering. The lesson was this: what an example of faith!

When I think of how God's people can pray with confidence, I often come back to the exile in Babylon, a situation we've visited a number of times in these reflections. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept.” Remember that? Along with Psalm 137, the Old Testament books of Lamentations and Ezekiel are set in Babylon; so is the book of Daniel. In chapter 9 Daniel is perplexed about the meaning of a vision he has had about the future; what exactly does it mean? He doesn't know. So he prays for guidance. In response God sends an angel, Gabriel, to explain it all. It's Gabriel's opening words that always strike me as significant – and encouraging:

“Daniel, I have now come to give you insight and understanding. As soon as you began to pray, an answer was given, which I have come to tell you, for you are highly esteemed. “

Now it was actually quite a long prayer if you read it. That leads to the temptation of imagining that prayer is about trying to impress God by eloquent liturgical prayers in church, or long-

winded extempore praying in a prayer meeting. No. “As soon as you began to pray ...” So if PERSEVERANCE (our theme for these few days) means anything, it’s about persevering in prayer.

If you want a modern example of this, think of services in Belfast Cathedral you have taken part in, whether in person or on line. Every Sunday without fail this past year there has been a specific prayer for folk suffering from Coronavirus and for those taking care of them, and I know that other congregations will be doing the same.

“As soon as you began to pray ...” In other words, the answers to our prayers are being worked out. Can we see this happening? No instant solutions, of course, no magic wands. But answers nonetheless. Vaccines in record time, selfless health service workers, generous acts of love, new patterns of international co-operation, churches reaching new audiences with the Christian gospel using information technology. I could go on, and I hope you could as well.

So keep on praying. Please – keep on praying. Especially if you feel helpless, unable to actually get out there and *do* something. Keep on praying. That is as important as anything else. Thank you!

**Friday March 19**

**Psalm 84 – keep digging**

1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty!

2 My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young— a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God.

4 Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah

5 Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.

6 As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.

7 They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.

8 Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah

9 Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one.

10 Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.

11 For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.

12 O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you.

When someone says to you, “keep digging” it’s usually because they’re watching you make a fool of yourself. But when Psalm 84 says “Keep digging”, it’s congratulating you! It’s verses 5 and 6 I’m thinking of here, and the version we sing in church puts it this way:

“Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee: in whose heart are thy ways. Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well: and the pools are filled with water.”

Well, ‘vale of misery’ is laying it on a bit thick. The ‘vale of misery’ or ‘valley of Baca’ refers to an arid place in the landscape of Israel where there were some trees or shrubs; the New English Bible uses the phrase ‘the thirsty valley’ here. Perhaps you can see the way my mind is working. But I also have this in mind: “Who going through the vale ... use it for a well.” Put it another way: the pilgrim might see the time that lies ahead in the valley only as an ordeal to be endured. But the language suggests that there’s some sort of blessing to be found there; not mark you, that the pilgrim simply sits there and wait for it to fall out of the sky, as it were. What the language does suggest instead is some sort of blessing that has to be sought out and then dug up.

This might well involve blessing to be shared with others rather than something just for yourself. That’s another perspective on PERSEVERANCE, our theme for these few days. Years ago I was told of a lady who had endured years of treatment for cancer. Eventually she ran out of road: the doctors told her that all they could do was to keep her comfortable until the end of her earthly life. Then she found what we could call “the peace that passes all understanding.” And having found peace, her hospital bed became a haven of peace as hard-pressed ward staff

found her to be the person they could talk to and let off steam with at the end of another exhausting shift.

So if the pandemic, and the restrictions we're living under make you feel as though you are going through a vale of misery, have you found some sort of blessing as you've journeyed through? If not, perhaps it's not too late to get your spade out and start digging.

**Saturday March 20**

**Jeremiah 29:4-14 – Keep serving**

**4** This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

**5** “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce.

**6** Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease.

**7** Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

**8** Yes, this is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have.

**9** They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them,” declares the LORD.

**10** This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.

**11** For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

**12** Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

**13** You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

**14** I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.”

Please think with me once again of Psalm 137, that howl of pain from people hundreds of miles from their home in Israel, exiled in a foreign land and mocked by their captors. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept”. If you can begin to imagine their situation, you can see how they would be longing to get home again at the first opportunity: when, when, O when? And some of their religious leaders were there, exiled with them. What, you may ask, were they saying to their people? One of them was the prophet Jeremiah. He listened to what his colleagues were saying: just hang in there, folks, it won't be long and we'll all be on the way back! That's what Jeremiah chapter 29 tells us.

It also tells us what God told Jeremiah to tell them. Two things: firstly, *don't* listen to this stuff. Secondly, 70 years. Yes, you heard right: 70 years. That's how long you're going to be here. So make the best of it. That's not *exactly* what God told Jeremiah to say. What Jeremiah said was this: “... seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.”

PERSEVERANCE is once again the name of the game. In other words, instead of sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves, there are things to be done. But there are voices around us telling us it's right to feel sorry for ourselves. Last October, a former senior minister in the Westminster government accused the current cabinet of “giving in” to scientific and medical leaders who were urging a second national lockdown, which came into place after a delay which took an appalling toll on hospitals and on bereaved families. Businesses that had to close

were, some said, “being punished”, that their city, or area, or business had been “picked on”. Let’s not minimize the pain that people who run businesses have gone through. But when this sort of language encourages us all to feel sorry for ourselves, it becomes difficult to rouse ourselves to action.

Listen again to those words of Jeremiah: “... seek the peace and prosperity of the city ... Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” There are things that many of us can be doing to be a blessing to others at this time; you might feel that your own contribution is going to be so small as to be insignificant. But I doubt that others would see it that way. It’s what we all put in together when we persevere that makes the difference.



**Monday March 22**

**Luke 2:22-40 – keep watching**

**22** When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

**23** (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”),

**24** and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

**25** Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

**26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.

**27** Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,

**28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

**29** “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

**30** For my eyes have seen your salvation,

**31** which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

**32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

**33** The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him.

**34** Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against,

**35** so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

**36** There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,

**37** and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

**38** Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

**39** When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.

**40** And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

You can think of the bible as a story unfolding over many centuries. In the cast list we have some major characters and we also have a large supporting cast. Some of these are really attractive: two of them we find in Luke’s Gospel chapter 2, which tells us about Mary and Joseph taking the young Jesus to the Jerusalem temple. Simeon and Anna appear. Anna is well into her eighties; we aren’t told how old Simeon is, but I get the impression that he’s no chicken either. They rejoice when they see Jesus; they recognise him as the Messiah they’ve been longing for. I also get the impression that Luke wants us to know that they’ve been waiting for this moment for a long time.

Telling us that we need to persevere with pandemic restrictions is all well and good; there's real encouragement, though, when you can see PERSEVERANCE at work in real lives – like Simeon and Anna. Some of the bright moments in the past year have been provided by people – sometimes old people – who've demonstrated it to us. Take the late Captain Sir Tom Moore: walking up and down his garden 100 times to raise a few thousand pounds for the National Health Service. He captured imaginations so much that the total quickly topped £30 million. He inspired other frail older folk to similar feats of endurance.

Then I think of a younger man: the rugby league player Kevin Sinfield, running seven marathons in seven days back in December, enduring the most appalling weather on the way, to raise £77,777 for research into motor neurone disease, as a tribute to his friend and team mate Rob Burrow. By the time he had finished his seventh run the total was over £1 million, and has since more than doubled.

Then there's Abraham Lincoln. What a disastrous career. Two business failures, a nervous breakdown, 8 defeats in various elections. In 1860 he became President of the United States of America.

We all need examples to inspire us. There are some among people we know and plenty of others in the news. And as we journey through Lent towards Holy Week and Easter, there's Jesus, our supreme example of PERSEVERANCE. I'm going to let the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews have the last word today. Read the whole letter and it becomes clear that he was concerned about a Christian congregation who were faltering on their Christian journey. This is what he said:

*“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”*

## **Tuesday March 23      John 13:1-5, 12-17 – keeping loving**

**1** It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

**2** The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus.

**3** Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God;

**4** so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.

**5** After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

**12** When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

**13** "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am.

**14** Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.

**15** I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

**16** I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

**17** Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

We started this series of reflections on the theme of PERSEVERANCE with the temptations of Jesus, which Matthew, Mark and Luke's Gospels place at the very beginning of His earthly ministry. We end this series by fast-forwarding to the last hours of Jesus' earthly life, as He shares a Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room, and prepares them for all that lies beyond the traumatic events which are about to take place and which we shall revisit during Holy Week.

John's Gospel devotes five whole chapters to this dark evening. This is how John starts in chapter 13: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love." We could equally well translate the Greek from which our English language New Testament is taken with this: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." I find that an amazing and moving statement of Jesus' PERSEVERANCE. He never stopped loving His disciples. That might be understandable if they had been 100 per cent supportive all the way. But read the gospels again, and you find that, time after time, they just didn't get it; time and time again they failed to grasp what He was doing. They argued amongst themselves about which of them was the greatest.

And there's worse to come. Before long they would all desert Him, as He told them they would. "The rest of them might, but I won't!" bragged Peter, who went on before many hours had passed to deny three times that he was a disciple or that he even knew Jesus.

But He never gave up on them. So the PERSEVERANCE of Jesus is all about His persevering love, that endures all the way and blossoms red in all that He achieved for us on the cross.. George Matheson understood this when he wrote his hymn “O love that wilt not let me go” more than a century ago. He wrote other hymns, but this one he described as “the quickest composition I ever achieved. It was done in three minutes. It seemed to me at the time as if someone was dictating the thought to me, and also giving the expression.”

John’s Gospel describes Jesus’ persevering love for those first faltering disciples. I could say the same for Jesus’ persevering love for *me*. I’m no more a glittering model of discipleship than they were. The wonder of it all is that my failures are not the last word on the subject. My relationship with Him is not secured by my religious track record; wonderful rather that it’s based on a “love that wilt not let *me* go”. I invite you to know that you could say the same.