

Resources for Sierra Leone Sunday 2017

'Sierra Leone Sunday' is marked each year by the Methodist Church in the Isle of Man to celebrate our twinning with the Methodist church of Sierra Leone (MCSL). In 2017 it falls on 5 March. Based on the lectionary readings for that date, these notes are offered simply as outline ideas for sermons or talks, to be used by anyone speaking / preaching in Manx Methodist churches.

Matthew 4: 1-11 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Is Tested in the Wilderness

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said,

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.”

Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down. For it is written: “He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

Jesus answered him, “It is also written: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.”

Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

One early Christian writer tells us that Jesus was tempted like other humans in every possible way (Hebrews 4:15). We shouldn't be surprised, then, that after his great moment of vision, when his sense of God's calling and love was so dramatically confirmed at his baptism, he had to face the 'whispering voices' of temptation and recognise them for what they were. These suggestions are all ways of distorting the true vocation: the vocation to be a truly human being, to be God's person, to be a servant to the world and to other people. Jesus must face these temptations now, and win at least an initial victory over them. If he doesn't, they will meet him suddenly, in the middle of the work, and they may overwhelm him.

The first two temptations play on the very strength Jesus has just received. 'You are my son, my beloved one!', God had said to him. Very well, whispers the demonic voice; if (Matthew's account all turns on this little word 'if') you really are God's son - surely he can't want you to go hungry when you have the power to get food for yourself. Surely you want people to see who you are? Why not do something really spectacular? And then, dropping the apparent logic, the enemy comes out boldly: forget your heavenly father. Just worship me and I will give you power, greatness like no one else ever had.

Jesus sees through the trap. He answers, each time, with the Bible and with God. He is committed to living off God's word; to trusting God completely, without setting up trick tests to put God on the spot. The flesh may scream for satisfaction; the world may beckon seductively; but Jesus is committed to loving and serving God alone.

The biblical texts Jesus used as his key weapons help us to see how this remarkable story fits into Matthew's gospel at this point. They are all taken from the story of Israel in the wilderness. Jesus had come through the waters of baptism like Israel crossing the Red Sea. He now had to face in 40 days and nights the equivalent of Israel's 40 years in the desert. But, where Israel failed again and again, Jesus succeeded. Jesus has come to do what God always wanted Israel to do - to bring light to the world.

Genesis 2:15-17 New International Version (NIV)

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Genesis 3:1-7 New International Version (NIV)

The Fall

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'"

The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

"You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Behind the story of the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness is the even deeper story of Adam and Eve in the garden. A single command; a single temptation; a single, devastating, result.

Verse 2:15 makes it clear that there is an order to creation, with humanity placed in Eden to 'till it and keep it'. The temptation is to usurp the role of the Creator - to be on a par with God. Hebrew prose uses 'merism' - a figure of speech whereby two opposites express a totality: e.g. up and down, night and day. Thus the tree of the knowledge of 'good and evil' is a way of expressing 'all knowledge' - omniscience! When the woman and the man make the choice of eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, their eyes are indeed opened: but not in the way the serpent promised. Instead they are aware of their nakedness, their vulnerability and their mortality.

When even tests us, it rarely, if ever, shows its true face.

Romans 5:12-19 New International Version (NIV)

Death Through Adam, Life Through Christ

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—

To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone's account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!

Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

From Genesis to Matthew the Bible tells the of the greater faith adventure of which Lent plays a part. Paul encapsulates this when he writes, 'For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners - so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous'. In this world we encounter sin, death, temptation, failure and disobedience - but in this same world we discover the possibility of faithful living - modeled for us in Jesus.

Psalm 32 (NIV)

Psalm 32 Of David. A maskil [probably a literary or musical term]

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.

For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Selah

Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD" - and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah

Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.

You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. Selah

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.

Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.

Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.

Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

It's a very human thing to try to shift the blame away from yourself - and yet when we do it, our words hang in the air for everyone to see how empty they are. Today's psalm is about the relief of coming clean about our sins and, through that acknowledgement, 'be-coming' clean. The heaviness weighing us down is lifted. God restores the truth in our hearts, and the relationship between us is repaired. So this is a psalm of two halves: our coming to our senses, and God's response.

Sermon ideas

Adam and Eve succumb to temptation with spectacular consequences. Jesus resists.

Succumbing to temptation is not inevitable - but it does have consequences.

We are rarely tempted by the mundane, ugly or routine. And if we are told that something will improve our lives - whether this is the knowledge of good and evil via an apple, or some labour-saving device, wrinkle free beauty cream or alluring after shave - we tend to be very susceptible.

The subject of temptation is very common in popular culture and songs. From the Police's 'Don't stand so close to me' via films like Robert Redford's Indecent Proposal to great works of literature such as Homer's Odyssey we see the power of temptation and they reflect the way we all try to rationalise our fall.

The temptations we all face, day by day and at critical moments of decision and vocation in our lives, may be very different from those of Jesus, but they have exactly the same point. They distract us to turn us aside from the path of servanthood to which our baptism has commissioned us. God has a costly but wonderfully glorious vocation for each one of us - but we are so easily distracted and thwart God's purpose.

If we have heard God's voice welcoming us as his children - we will also hear the whispered suggestions of temptation.

We live in a world where 21,000 children die every day from poverty, hunger, and easily preventable diseases. God tells us that what we do for the poor we will find we have done for him. The temptation is to live as if these children are of no concern to us and have no value that we recognise.

We live in a world where 800 million people go to bed hungry or malnourished every day of the week. God tells us to love our neighbour. The temptation is to turn inward - to talk of people in need nearer home - to do... nothing.

We live in a world where 1.3 billion people live in 'extreme poverty' (with an income of less than £1 per day). It seems as if the rest of the world has turned its back on them and pretends that they are not there. But this is not about charity – this is about justice. Rich countries do not pay enough for the work of coffee growers, cotton pickers, rutile miners and others who contribute to the wealth of consumer goods we see in our shops. The temptation is not to understand the links. To convince ourselves that we are not connected to the poverty of these neighbours.

We don't have to succumb to these temptations. We live just 6 hours by air from Sierra Leone where a Methodist Church of 40,000 people runs three major development programmes, 3 major hospitals, more than 100 schools – and a Centre for People Living with HIV/AIDS. We have resisted the temptation to pretend we are blind and deaf to their needs. We have dug deep and have provided funding for a new centre that will work with up to 1,000 HIV/AIDS sufferers (most women in Sierra Leone) and the 5,000 family members affected by their illness.

We know from Jesus' example that overcoming temptation not only makes us stronger, but is also bound up with issues of integrity, morality and mission. In resisting the devil, an unsullied Jesus was able to continue an earthly mission that led to our redemption.

Hymn suggestions

From Singing the Faith

94 "To God be the Glory" (This was sung at the original twinning service in Freetown).

611 "Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you" - chosen as our twinning hymn

673 "Will you come and follow me"

693 "Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair"

696 "For the healing of the nations, Lord we pray with one accord"

705 "It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand"

706 "Longing for light, we wait in darkness"

713 "Show me how to stand for justice"

From Hymns & Psalms

463 "To God be the Glory" (This was sung at the original twinning service in Freetown).

402 "For the healing of the nations, Lord we pray with one accord"

404 "It is God who holds the nations in the hollow of his hand"

408 "The right hand of God is writing in our land"

Prayer resources

Prayer of Response

Loving God, you know the habits that we own - together and as individuals.
There have been times when we have lost sight of just what it is that you require of us.
We have ignored justice and acted with no thought of the consequences for others.
We have been unmoved by mercy.
We have trampled on humility and walked so proudly that we trampled on others too.

Lord, help the habits of our daily lives to reflect our faith in full.

Loving God, you know the habits that we own - together and as individuals.
There have been times when our lives have been bland - and dark.
Help us to become the salt-seasoning of compassion that brings out the God-flavours of this earth.
Help us to become lights of justice, bringing out the God-colours in the world.

Lord, help the habits of our daily lives to reflect our faith in full.

Loving God, you know the habits that we own - together and as individuals. We see the challenge of your word and we understand that this really is what it's all about: being the servant of all, loving one another, being humble, gentle and patient. Being tolerant. Encouraging, helping and building others up.

Lord, help the habits of our daily lives to reflect our faith in full.

Loving God, you know the habits that we own - together and as individuals.
Guide our prayers - for honesty to win out over deceit - for those who feel loss to be comforted - for justice to win out so that peacemakers may prevail - for wisdom to guide the election of leaders - for the sick to have the chance of life before death - for Sierra Leone. For our lives to be responsive to the condition of those who surround us.

Lord, help the habits of our daily lives to reflect our faith in full.

Loving God, you know the habits that we own - together and as individuals.

We offer our prayers for the Methodist Church in the Isle of Man and beyond. We pray for our President and District Chair, ministers and leaders - and for the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone with whom we are twinned. We pray for the caring work of MCSL with women, men and children living with HIV in Freetown - we thank you for the church's commitment. We pray for all those who will be involved in the planning and running of the new centre - that they will be encouraged and empowered. We pray for our lives to reflect our understanding that what we do for the hungry, the poor, the sick, the vulnerable, the lonely we will find we have done for you.

Lord, help the habits of our daily lives to reflect our faith in full. Amen

Prayer of Intercession

We pray for the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone.

For our brothers and sisters in Christ

That we may grow closer in our understanding

That we may learn from each other's faith

Open our eyes to see each other

And strengthen our hands to reach out to our twin

We pray for the many links between our countries

For the long-term aid and challenge given to Sierra Leone by our International Development Committee

Help our links to grow along with our mutual respect

Open our eyes to see each other

And strengthen our hands to reach out to our twin

We hold before you the leaders in the Methodist Church of Sierra Leone

Bishop Albert Beah, the President of MCSL

Rev Ronald Bobb-Williams, Secretary of Conference

We thank you for the schools, hospitals and development schemes that our twin church runs and we pray that their work will be fruitful in every way.

Open our eyes to see each other

And strengthen our hands to reach out to our twin

We pray for the work of MCSL with women, men and children living with HIV in Freetown.

We pray that the planned new centre now under construction will be a powerful resource in that city.

We remember Francis Musa, Head of the MCSL Development Team that leads the project funded by the Isle of Man.

And we pray for Hawa Juana, project leader of the People Living with HIV centre.

We thank you for the commitment of MCSL. We pray for the staff, the people who attend and their families. For the on-going work and the opportunity for this work to grow and develop with a new clinic.

Open our eyes to see each other

And strengthen our hands to reach out to our twin

Loving God. What a privilege it is to share with your church in another continent.

What a challenge to see a church in such need and yet so committed to helping children to learn; the sick to be comforted; and the poor to escape hunger and poverty.

Help us to journey with them, to learn from them, to share with them.

For we know that we share the same Father.

Open our eyes to see each other

And strengthen our hands to reach out to our twin

These things we ask in Jesus name. Amen.

The three photos below show the Manse where the People Living with HIV/AIDS work has been going on since 2002. One photo shows the site before work started. The second photo shows the ground clearance work. The third photo shows the first phase of construction underway. The drawings show the plan and front elevation views.



Front Elevation of MCSL PLHIV Centre to be built by IOM Methodist Church



Proposed layout of MCSL PLHIV Centre

