

Lent 2 Written Service 16th March 2025 by Rev'd Peter Clark Lenten Liturgy

Every year we tend to open our worship during the weeks of Lent with a common set of thoughts, prayers and often symbols. This year many of the churches across the Circuit are using a set based on the concept of Soul Food. Let's start our worship with this week's one, which has a theme of Soul Shelter so we all nourished by a safe home (for everyone), and uses an umbrella as the symbol and we pray:

Give us this day our daily bread to shelter our soul.

As bricks and mortar give our bodies shelter, shelter our being, our souls, with your spirit.

Give us this day our daily bread to shelter our soul.

As houses protect and keep safe our physical being, hold us in the shelter and safety of your Word.

Give us this day our daily bread to shelter our soul.

As an umbrella holds back the rain and the storms, so Lord be our umbrella, our tent, our shelter in life's uncertain times.

O Lord our God, on this Lenten journey, shelter us in the struggling world's uncertainties. Amen

Hymn - Rejoice & Sing 29 - Father , we adore you

Father , we adore you,
lay our lives before you,
how we love You.

Jesus, we adore you,
lay our lives before you,
how we love You.

Spirit, we adore you,
lay our lives before you,
how we love you.

Terry Coelho. (1952-)

Copyright © 1972 Maranatha!

Music/Adm. by CopyCare.

Prayers of Approach and Preparation

Generous God, we come, individually and together, as your children to be resourced, inspired and blessed. For you are a God who cares, a God who honours his promises, and we praise you with all we are and all we have. Amen. O God, our strength and our guide, when the way ahead is unclear – grant us clarity.

When the way ahead is costly – grant us courage.

When the way ahead is lonely – grant us companionship.

When the way ahead is dark – grant us hope.

When the way ahead is painful – grant us comfort.

When the way ahead is tiring – grant us energy.

When the way ahead is risky – grant us daring.

When the way ahead is your way – grant us joy, peace and steadfastness.

For your glory, and in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

And, Lord, forgive us when we break promises, when we let others down, when we are afraid of the consequences of doing the right thing.

Forgive us, and help us to be strong in your strength, that we might not be ashamed of our weakness, but faithful to our calling, with your help and with the help of others. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

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.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen

1st Scripture Reading - Genesis 15: 1-12 & 17-18

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.' 2 But Abram said, 'O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?' 3 And Abram said, 'You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.' 4 But the word of the Lord came to him, 'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.' 5 He brought him outside and said, 'Look towards heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.' 6 And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 Then he said to him, 'I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.' 8 But he said, 'O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?' 9 He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.' 10 He brought him all these and cut them in two, laying each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. 17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates

Reflection - Promises, promises

It's Lent so you might expect a Jesus story but I am focusing on the Old Testament for three reasons. Firstly, the story of Jesus and the people of God began with Abram. Secondly, as one of my friends once said, two thirds of the Bible is in the Hebrew Scriptures and, like an iceberg lies disregarded far too often below the surface. And, thirdly, it is full of amazing stories that, I believe, connect profoundly with our faith and the reason for Lent in the first place. Let's see how it pans out, shall we?

Often in the Bible and with God, things are not what they seem and we are left confused and often disappointed by the way things are panning out. It is also worth pointing out, that, almost always whenever a Bible story starts with words such as "Do not be afraid," you can probably bet your last pound that, **you need to be very, very afraid!** I need only mention Zechariah in the Temple, Mary with Gabriel and those poor shepherds looking after their sheep who were all told to "Fear not!" As if!

But of course we know the outworking of those stories, which sort of worked out (challenging as it all was.) And, similarly, Abram at this point in our episode today, has a long way to go to the outworking of his story. He's already upped sticks and travelled miles on the unlikely promise of a son and heir and he's had some rather exciting battles and adventures since. He and his equally aged wife (an unlikely mother) have even been on a return journey to Egypt, where Sarai narrowly escaped with her virtue intact and there are many other adventures to come.

Nevertheless, Abram is not surprisingly just a bit perplexed at this moment in time in that he has been promised much and seen little so far of delivery! It's all very well the Lord telling him not to be afraid (and we all know what that means!) but he's been promised a son and so far, wealthy as he is, his heir is a distant relation! It's all very well the Lord telling him that he is Abram's shield and promising a very great reward but he reasonably replies that he continues to be childless. Time is running out and the unlikely promise does seem to be getting even less likely the longer time passes.

But it is God who demonstrates the patience here and first simply restates the promise, pointing to the star-strewn skies, and telling him his descendants will be equally plentiful.

And Abram believes him. Once again, in the face of an unlikely promise, Abram's faithfulness shines through. Personally I find that as amazing!

And that might have been the end of it, except that God has not finished yet. For there then occurs a bizarre ritual that, frankly we have no idea precisely what it means. Three animals and two birds are sacrificed and the heifer, goat and ram are sliced in half. Abram has to drive away the birds seeking the carrion, falls into a deep and deeply troubled sleep. He awakes to the strange sight of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passing between the severed animals, before the Lord is reported as making 'a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates." A mighty promise on top of the earlier mighty promise of offspring as many as the stars. What oh what is going on?

Frankly I have no idea, though suspect that 4,000 or so years ago, when animal sacrifice was more common, it rang some bells of familiarity, not least in the sphere of making a Covenant? Since the verb translated as 'making' a Covenant is literally translated as 'cutting' one, it is possible that there is an implication that if Abram and his descendants fail to keep their part in this special promise, their fate will be not unlike that of the sliced-in-half animals? There is a consistent message in Old Testament theology of there being a **cost** to making a commitment to God (hence 'Sacrifice!') plus a cost of not carrying through. Prophets regularly threaten God's retribution alongside a promise of faithfulness ... if only humanity and God's People would keep their (our?) side of the deal?

But equally, it also makes the strong case that the Lord's commitment to this Covenant was iron-clad and unbreakable too! And of course we, familiar with the outworking of the story, know how God's promise of a son and later descendants - as many indeed as offered - was most certainly delivered upon. So we, unlike poor Abram as he underwent this strange ritual, at least are reassured that there is certain delivery on God's promises.

The story of the People of God seems to me to be a series of periods of compliance with the bargain / deal / Covenant followed by failure to do so. At which point disaster strikes, the people cry out to God, who responds by rescuing them again. A period of compliance follows before, inevitably (and sadly) another period of the People turning away from God's way occurs. In between in biblical times, the faithful remnant continued to carry out animal sacrifices and to a degree pay lip service to the Covenant. However, as the prophet Amos indicated, even these became somehow meaningless and as the writer of the book of Hebrews suggests, all got wiped away by a one-off sacrifice of the Son of God on a cross just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Followed of course by the return to life of the sacrificed one! (Oops I've mentioned Resurrection and it's only the second week of Lent - but of course we know the story and it's too good a resolution to fail to get me excited!)

Which brings me back to the Covenant which we all, as followers of Jesus, have made and it is worth saying, is one that is not intended to be simply a one-off act, but one to be lived out in our daily lives after that act! I don't know about you, but in the world as it is at the moment, I cannot think of a better time to express our faith in a God of love, peace and justice ... or indeed of a time when it is more needed than ever?

As I write, there are processes for peace between both Ukraine and Russia and between Israel and Palestinians and to my eyes, the machinations appear as strange and incomprehensible as those events with Abram and a torch passing between dead animals. But I have to hope that God's hand is in there, passing a lit torch of peace in the midst of it all, prompting both the powerful and the powerless to get their acts together ... to work together ... and live together in a just peace.

Unlike the story of Abram we don't know how it will all work out but, like him in the middle of his adventures, we can, perhaps take comfort from our faith in God as **our** shield too?

Indeed, in these difficult times when we are confused and disappointed about the way things seem to be turning out, and are tempted to think that maybe God is not keeping faith with us, perhaps it is worth remembering that things are not always as they might seem and that, maybe, just maybe, we should try not to be afraid after all?

Remember that the history of the biblical story is one of God making a promise ... **and keeping it**? As Paul wrote to Timothy, "If we died with Christ, we shall live with him; if we endure, we shall reign with him, if we are **faithless**, he will remain **faithful**." (2 Timothy 2:11-13) Amen

Prayers

Loving God, we pray for the brokenness in our world: especially we pray for those whose lives are torn apart by violence, war and disaster. We pray for leaders of governments and business that they might turn from narrow self-interest to global concern.

Loving God, we pray for those who find themselves in desperate situations, not knowing where to turn. We pray for refugees and seekers of asylum. We pray for those in our own communities whose lives are in turmoil. We pray for those who provide support – practically, emotionally and financially.

Loving God, we pray for those whose strength is failing. We pray for those who are unwell, in body, mind or spirit. We pray for all those who work and serve in health and social care. In the silence of our hearts, we name those known to us in need...

Loving God, we pray for those who are bereaved, and for those for whom anniversaries occur at this time. We give thanks for Your eternal promise that You will be with us always, even to the end of the age.

We praise You and give thanks for the beauty of creation, the joy which the diverse creativity in many forms enriches our lives, and for the times our souls rejoice!

Loving God, we pray for the church throughout the world, and the church families of which we are apart. We pray for the church across the globe, sadly fragmented but united in you: we pray for the unity of the Body of Christ. We give thanks for Your faithfulness which never ends, and especially we pray for those who are taking the first steps in faith.

Gracious and merciful God, accept these prayers, for the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with You – One God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For You are Our Creator, Our Saviour, and Our Giver of Life. Amen.

Hymn - Rejoice & Sing 323

Away with our fears,
our troubles and tears:
the Spirit is come, the witness of Jesus
returned to his home. Our Advocate there
by his blood and his prayer the gift has
obtained, for us he has prayed, and the
Comforter gained.

Our glorified Head
his Spirit has shed,

with his people to stay, and never again
will he take him away. Our heavenly Guide
with us shall abide, his comforts impart,
and set up his kingdom of love in the
heart. The heart that believes his kingdom
receives, his power and his peace, his life,
and his joy's everlasting increase.

Charles Wesley (1707-88) altd.

Blessing

Go now in peace, never be afraid.
God will go with you each hour of every day.
Go now in faith, steadfast strong and true.
Know he will guide you in all you do.
Go now in love, and show you believe.

Reach out to others so all the world can see.

God will be there watching from above.

Go now in peace, in faith and in love

Don & Nancy Besig © 1988, 1989, Harold Flammer Inc.