

**Sunday 18 February 2024**

# The First Sunday of Lent

(sermon)



**Sermon** © Revd Dr Paul Monk.

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I'll start with a secret, though in a sense I hope it's not too much of a secret: I want God. I do! I want **God!** I **want** God! **I** want God!

Actually, if I'm honest, I want a whole number of other things: being human, I want food, sleep, and security. I want other things that are genuinely good: I want health, my family, I want peace. But sometimes I want things that often work against and contradict my desire for God, such as lots of time off, like luxury. And sometimes I want things I know are not of God such as status, or worse. I'm sure you can imagine.

That all worries me. It worries me very much indeed. What worries me more is that sometimes I don't know if a thing is what God wants or something that works against God. In truth, sometimes we won't know if a thing is of God or not until we have made a good start on it—a new project for the church, a new kind of service, offering a person time. All of these considerations demonstrate that we need to know God.

But how can we follow God if we don't know God; and how can we know God if we don't follow Him? We need to avoid distinctions, and for that we need clarity.

It's a big problem and, I suggest, one that Jesus himself was fully aware of and probably was very, very fearful about. That's why, as soon as he was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, he had to make sure he was doing the right thing at the right time for the right reasons. He had to find out what God *really* wanted... and that meant getting really, really close to God, in order to listen. That's the background to the Gospel passage this morning.

Jesus wanted to avoid distractions in his prayers because he wanted to know what God wanted. But here's the scary bit: if Jesus could be distracted in prayer then so can we.

At first sight, it's ridiculous: God is the biggest, mightiest thing in the universe—how can we avoid him? Simple! There are things between Him and us. Some are straightforward enough, like tiredness and the phone ringing. But some are malign. The combined might of the powers of darkness are determined that we do not meet with God, and will put anything and everything between God and us to engineer our missing God. That's the second part of the background to this morning's Gospel passage.

You see, all of us have dual nationality. We inhabit two kingdoms, have two backgrounds. We are of Heaven but we are of earth. And we need our desire to emigrate from earth to Heaven. How do we do so?

It's time for an analogy, so here goes. Think of an astronomer seeking the biggest *physical* thing in the universe, a blackhole. It's invisible to the eye. It's invisible to a telescope. But it's so massive that it affects everything for billions of miles and

for billions of years. It affects the gravity that keeps you on the ground and it may affect your mind and therefore very likely to affect the soul.

But, being invisible, 'seeing' a blackhole is something of a challenge. How do you do it? To the ancient world (and surprisingly often here too), there were three heavens: the sky above our heads filled with clouds and rain—the 'first heaven'; above that space are stars and comets—the second heaven; and God is further still, beyond all of it—the third heaven. That's why St Paul could say, 'I know a man in Christ who was carried up into the *third* heaven'—he was saying he's had a profound vision of God. Well, that's what we want too.

And because we want the third heaven, we need to look past the first heaven and past the second heaven and deep into the third—into very presence of God. We need to hone our ways of looking, which means avoiding distractions. What does an astronomer do? Well, first he goes outside: there's no point in pointing a huge telescope upwards if you're inside a small bedroom. You'll see a ceiling, a bookcase ... you'll probably see a light-fitting and mistake its light for a star. Second, the astronomer waits until the sky is clear. But, even outside, the telescope will pick up the light of the sun more than anything else, so he'll become nocturnal and learn to point the telescope into the *night* sky, looking to a timetable. Even then, he may find only rain or clouds until the conditions are just right, so he learns to look with pragmatism. Indeed, he'll probably position himself on top of a mountain to position himself above the clouds. As he gets more serious still, he'll put a telescope into space, so the effects of gravity and dust don't get in the way. But even then he gets only glimpses, small bits of data, snippets of insight. In fact, each time he strips away a form of interference—walls, then light itself, rain and snow, clouds and atmosphere, gravity—he will realise there is more to see. Each time he strips away a layer, the vision becomes more true, more genuine, more authentic, more able to cope with reality. Each successive vision can better withstand requests for precision and is therefore better. The vision clarifies but it takes a lifetime of study.

In exactly the same way, Jesus was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, not to see a super-heavy blackhole, but to see a super-merciful, mighty and all-loving God. He intended to strip away that which was not of God. He stripped away the walls of the carpenter's shed and his living room because they were too familiar. He would have looked for God and seen a wall. He went outside to see God and would have seen the familiar villagers and children, so he went further. He went into the desert where the distractions were fewer—no colours, no set mealtimes, no one banging on the door, 'Jesus! Can you mend my yoke please!' The account in Mark's Gospel today says almost nothing but it's clear that although Jesus was tempted he withstood all of it. He developed his spiritual muscles. *And so must we!*

That's why, now—at the beginning of Lent—we discuss again the idea of honing and developing our spiritual skills. It's not easy. But we must learn to strip away that which is not of God. We will first avoid the obvious distractions of phone and a work schedule. We will then move away from prejudice and over-familiarity, so praying by rote must go. We can fruitfully try new ways of praying. We can also try different ideas of who God is, what He's like, how He operates. We must jettison the caricatures and nonsenses like the image of an old man with a white beard on a cloud or, worse, the idea of God being 'out there' in space. Many of these things are good in their time but all can become terrible spiritual distractions. Like the astronomer looking upward and seeing the dust in the high-up atmosphere, we can look toward God and see church, services, liturgy; hear the Lord's Prayer and hear only words; sing hymns and hear only music. First and foremost, *we need God*.

So I invite you, this Lent, to go 'into the desert' (whatever that is for you, wherever it is for you in any meaningful spiritual sense) ... and seek God.