Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you must use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Genesis 9.8-17; Psalm 25.1-9; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-15

Homily

Today’s homily has been written by Mrs Mel Eyeons, LLM, The Paxtons with Diddington and Southoe (Benefice)

Mark is a Gospel in a hurry. It’s got a message to get out and it’s going to do it as quickly as possible. There’s not a lot of room for setting the scene or including a lot of details. However, there are still some arresting images, such as the picture of the Spirit driving Jesus out into the wilderness. Jesus has just been baptised, been affirmed as God’s Son, and is, we would think, ready to begin a successful ministry. But first he must go into the wilderness.

There are several parallels between Jesus’s experiences and the story of Israel, and these can help us understand what’s going on here.

Firstly, just as Israel was rescued from slavery by going through the waters of the Red Sea, so Jesus goes through the waters of baptism. An obvious question, of course, is why Jesus bothered with baptism, given that he had no need for the repentance that John was preaching. The answer here is that in being baptised like the rest of us, Jesus becomes one with us. He takes on our humanity and our sin and stands shoulder to shoulder with us. Jesus identifies himself with us in his baptism and we become identified with Jesus because we’re joined with him through our baptisms. This means that as he goes into the Jordan, he takes us with him, and as he comes out again, he brings us out as well and rescues us from our own captivity to sin.

This also means that each one of us is a son or daughter of God because we’re joined to Christ. We hear the same voice that Jesus hears, telling him that he’s God’s Son and loved. The same message from heaven is aimed at us. The voice that speaks to Jesus speaks to us as well. That voice says to each one of us, ‘You are my son, you are my daughter, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased’. Not because of what we’ve done or not done. And not despite what we’ve done or not done, either. But because of who we are and because of who God is.

Secondly, just as Israel spent 40 years wandering the wilderness before reaching their home in the Promised Land, so Jesus goes into the wilderness for 40 days, experiencing all of its loneliness, danger, and difficulties. This is a place in which the sun shines relentlessly, nothing much grows for most of the year, and there’s no shade to protect you from the temperatures of over 40 degrees Celsius. It’s a place where you truly learn what really matters. Here, Jesus identifies with the experiences of his people. He knows what it’s like to
face struggles, to be hungry, lonely, and afraid. He knows about the power of temptation and the desire to do things the easy way instead of the right way. He knows that life is full of ups and downs, that moments of wonder, like his baptism, can be followed by trials and testing. He knows about hope and fear, joy and sorrow, and how sometimes those things can be all mixed together.

There is a problem with Mark’s account of Jesus’s time in the wilderness, however, in that it tells us almost nothing about the temptations Jesus faced. We don’t have Matthew and Luke’s descriptions, just the statement that Jesus was tempted by Satan and was with wild animals and angels. We don’t even know if the wild animals were friendly or not, and what the angels’ role was there.

But perhaps not having the details of the temptations in Mark’s account can actually be made a helpful thing. After all, how many of us can realistically be tempted to turn stones into bread, to throw ourselves off high places to make God rescue us, or to take control of all the kingdoms of the world? Our temptations are likely to be rather more mundane than all that. Perhaps, if we take the focus off those particular struggles faced by Jesus, we can make space to answer Lent’s invitation to reflect on our own experiences of temptation and struggle, and to come to terms with the times when we all inevitably fail.

Invitation might seem a strange word to use here. After all, who really wants to focus on weakness, failure, sin and death, as Lent encourages us to do? These are things we generally run from as much as possible. Many of us put a lot of time and effort into carefully hiding the less acceptable and messier parts of our lives. But Lent encourages us out into our own wilderness to confront those things, to put down the mask and be truly honest with ourselves and God. This can be hard work, but there’s also a freedom and relief to be found in not pretending to be doing better than we are. It can be good to let go of the burden of having to strive for a perfect image. And as we go out and confront these things, we go in the knowledge that Jesus goes with us, offering help, understanding, and forgiveness, because he’s been out there in the wilderness too.

Finally, Jesus emerges from the wilderness to bring good news. Just as Israel finally entered the Promised Land after years of wandering, so now we have the chance to enter God’s kingdom and receive the promise of being saved. Jesus has been prepared for this moment and the ministry that will follow by both his baptism and his time in the wilderness. His baptism has affirmed who he is and the constant and unchanging love of his Father, a love that he is ready to share with all who want it. And his time in the wilderness has made it possible for him to enter into all of our human experiences and to be a guide to us as we navigate both the highs and the lows of our own lives.

So, as we enter Lent, we go in the knowledge that we don’t go alone but with all the power and love of God behind us.
**Suggested intercessions**

God of wilderness and water, your Son was baptised and tempted as we are. Guide us through this season of Lent, not so that we may avoid struggle, but so that we may open ourselves to blessing. When we go through wildernesses, may we know your presence with us, and when we face temptations may your power protect us. Fill our hearts with joy of the good news you bring us.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

God of heaven and earth, your Son came to establish a kingdom not of this world. Bless those who strive for peace between the nations and bring your healing to all the conflicts of the world. May your compassion fall on those displaced by war, violence or disaster. Give humility to all with power to worship you alone.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

God of compassion and love, you know what is to struggle alone. Pour your blessing on all in our communities who are lonely or afraid for the future, and bring comfort to those who feel abandoned or unloved. May all who struggle to cope with everyday life know your loving presence with them. Inspire us to serve others with the love you have given us.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

God of all healing and life, you came to set all things right. Look with mercy, we pray, on all who suffer, in body, mind, or spirit. Bring comfort to those in pain, peace to those who are afraid, relief to those worn out by caring for loved ones and help to those who grieve.

Lord, hear us.

Lord, graciously hear us.

God of the living and the dead, you promise us a new kingdom in which death shall be no more and all tears will be wiped away. We remember with thanks all those who have died and commend them to your unfailing mercy. May we be gathered into your kingdom to sit at your table.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers, for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.
Suggested hymns/songs

Be still and know
Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire
Eternal Ruler of the ceaseless round
Forty days and forty nights
Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
Love is his word, love is his way
O let the Son of God enfold you
O love, how deep, how broad, how high
The kingdom of God is justice and joy

Ideas for all-age worship

Writing prayers on dove-shaped pieces of paper
Have people throw (soft!) balls around to show how temptations can fly at us.