



Sermon preached by Dr Simone Maghenzani on 22nd February 2026

Readings: *Matthew 4:1-11; Psalm 32; Romans 5:12-10*

Lent I

And so, it is Lent. Once again, it begins by taking us back, to the starting point, to the wilderness. We are invited to walk with Jesus, and to be tested in our own vocations and lives as he was in his. After being baptized by John in the River Jordan, Jesus went off alone into the wilderness where he spent forty days ultimately asking himself the question of what it meant to be Jesus and what his own ministry would be about. The temptations placed before him were temptations to exalt himself and to prove himself. The tempter inhabits the expectations of the world, which Jesus will ultimately confound. As Paul says, the power of Christ is shown in his weakness, in the lowering on the cross, before the only true exaltation, that of the day of the Resurrection. Quite the opposite from what the devil offers, angels that carry you and all that. During Lent, Christians are supposed to ask, one way or another, what it means to be themselves. To answer questions like this is to begin to hear something not only of who you are, but of what you are becoming and what you are failing to become. Lent offers the opportunity – the responsibility? – to ask what it means to be ourselves. Do I inhabit the integrity that I think I am called to have? Or the honesty? Or the faith? Do I yet inhabit the joy that God placed in my soul not just to relish but to share? Do I yet inhabit the courage to really challenge those who are unfair or unjust? I find that I cannot answer these questions but with a confession of my shortcomings. Sackcloth and ashes must be at the start of Lent, if we want to see Easter at the end.

If we begin Lent not on the defensive but with honest self-assessment, and a readiness to learn challenging truths about ourselves, we might grow into the people we are called to be. Like Christ, our greatest testing is to do the right thing for the wrong reason: in his case, to be worshipped and exalted, but by the means offered by the world and the devil, and not after following paths of service. None of us is necessarily powerful, but there is much that is within our power: for example, how do I exercise that measure of power which I have at work, or in my personal relations? I often find myself pondering this question, especially when I allow my innate impatience to take over. As Christians, I find our biggest temptations, like those of Christ, aren't about bringing deliberate harm to others – I doubt any of us would do so consciously. But temptations are often in situations when we make sure that we ultimately bring something to ourselves, or to our purposes, however noble they appear. Pontius Pilate was after all a very merciful man, until it became too risky to be so, for a sensible and pragmatic colonial governor. Aren't we all just very sensible men and women, in middle-class, well-educated, well behaved, liberal, tolerant, Cambridge? We are most tempted just by making happen what we want for ourselves, and to be blinded by the apparent goodness in it. As someone said, no self-respecting devil would invite you to ruin yourself or others. That is in the fine print, it comes later. Do you remember C. S. Lewis's 'Screwtape Letters'? 'Indeed, my nephew, the safest road to Hell is the gradual one--the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts ...Your affectionate uncle, Screwtape.' In all of this, our temptation perhaps is to compromise. We compromise on our principles and then call it progress. We scale back our expectations for ourselves, then congratulate ourselves on all the headway we are making. We set out to make a challenging effort, and when we find ourselves stressed and too busy (aren't we all?), we move the goalposts and pat ourselves on the back for reaching the end zone. Lent offers us a chance to stop, to look at the ground, to discover once again that we are in the wilderness – that the world is barren, that we lull ourselves in comfortable lives amid a humanity ravaged by violence and sin. But we must ask ourselves: despite all your consciousness, your piety, your faith, your care, are you sure you are also not standing on a slippery slope? In our liberal Christianity it is too easy to think that sin is just about the violent structures of power of the world – and sinful indeed they are. But sin is also about me, and who I am.

So, what is this sin of which we are talking about? Sin can be understood as the experience of being separated from God, losing the intimacy and trust for which we were created. It is also a rupture in our relationships with one another, where fear, pride, or indifference replace mutual care. And at its deepest level, sin is a kind of inner fragmentation, a turning away from our own true selves and the wholeness we are called to live.

Now, at the start of Lent there is one further and most terrible temptation, a fundamental misunderstanding of what Christian discipleship is about: thinking that Lent is about me changing or improving myself. On the contrary. Lent is about seeing who we are, confessing how far away are we from God, until we finally recognise once again with St Paul to the Galatians that: 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.' 'For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose' (Philippians). Lent is not about me, is about God at work even in me.

Therefore, we turn to our Romans lesson. We here are being ushered into the very architecture of the gospel. Paul is unveiling the deep structure of human existence — who we are in Adam, and who we become in Christ.

Paul begins with a stark, almost jarring statement: "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin." Sin is a power that crossed a threshold, stepping into the world like an intruder who intends to stay. And death follows behind it, not as the end of biological life, but as estrangement from God and one another, as the shadows that fall across every human story. The scandal of death as the interruption of a relationship of love – grief is just what's left. And then Paul adds that enigmatic phrase: "because all sinned." Not "all might sin". Adam stands as the representative of a people, and his trespass becomes ours.

This is not how we like to think of ourselves. We imagine ourselves as autonomous individuals, authors of our own moral destiny. But Paul insists that we are born into a story already unfolding — a story of rebellion, of loss, of death reigning. Look around ourselves, but look also into yourself: don't you see rebellion, loss, and death?

And yet, Paul does not leave us there. He moves with urgency toward the One shaped like Adam who stands opposite Adam, the One who does not merely repair what Adam broke but inaugurates an entirely new creation.

Adam's act brings condemnation; Christ's act brings justification. Adam's disobedience makes us sinners; Christ's obedience makes humanity righteous. And Paul cannot help himself — he keeps saying "much more." Much more has grace abounded. Much more does the free gift overflow. Paul wants us to feel the asymmetry. Adam's act is devastating, the Adam who each one of us is, is devastating, but Christ's act is infinitely greater. Grace does not merely balance the scales; it tips them beyond measure. Grace is not the equal and opposite reaction to sin; it is the overwhelming triumph of God's redemptive purpose.

And then Paul says something curious: "The law came in to increase the trespass." What does he mean? The Reformed tradition has long spoken of the law's three uses, and each of them helps us hear Paul rightly.

First, the law restrains sin. Even in a fallen world, God does not allow wickedness to run unchecked. The law — whether written on tablets or inscribed on the conscience — curbs human evil. It preserves order. It keeps society from collapsing into chaos. When Paul speaks of death reigning "from Adam to Moses," he is reminding us that even before Sinai, humanity was accountable. God's moral order was not absent.

But *second* — and this is Paul's emphasis here — the law reveals sin. It exposes it. It names it. It strips away our illusions of righteousness. When Paul says the law "increases the trespass," he means that the law makes sin visible, undeniable, and therefore inexcusable. The law is a mirror held up to the human soul, and what we see there is not flattering. We see Adam's likeness. We see our inability. We see our

need. And this is the law's severe mercy: it drives us to Christ. It leaves us no refuge in ourselves, so that we might find refuge in him.

If we so often return to the promises of blessing contained in Scripture, it is because we stand in such great need of consolation; and who does not know how sudden and vigorous a comfort may come to us from a single verse that recalls one of God's promises at precisely the moment we most need it? Yet the Bible is not only a book of consolation. When we understand it rightly, Scripture speaks to us with grave insistence about our sin. In reading it, we are continually driven to "come to ourselves" and to recognise our radical—and humanly insurmountable—corruption. The Bible is the book in which humanity loses, one by one, all its illusions about its native goodness and its acquired virtues. The demands of God are revealed with such clarity that we are compelled to implore: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

And *then*, for those who belong to Christ, the law takes on a *third use*. It becomes a guide. Not a condemning voice, but a gracious one. Not a taskmaster, but a teacher. The law shows us what it means to live as the new humanity, the people of the Second Adam. The law becomes the shape of gratitude, the pattern of sanctified living, the way in which redeemed people learn to walk in the light of the One who saved them. The law accomplishes its ultimate purpose: turning itself into love.

So we inherit death, but we receive life. We begin in condemnation, but we are brought into justification. The law that condemns gets summarised into loving your God and your neighbour. This means that the Christian life is not a project of self-improvement. It is not a moral renovation. Discipleship is a transfer of allegiance, a change of citizenship, a movement from one realm to another. We are placed into Christ's kingdom. We are no longer defined by the trespass that condemned us but by the obedience of Christ that justifies us.

So, let us begin this Lent journey. And may we remember this quote from Paul: *The Lord said to me: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.* May it be so. Amen.

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