



St Marylebone  
Parish Church

## Septuagesima 2019

**8.30 am and 11 am**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

“Septuagesima – seventy days to Easter’s primrose tide of praise”, as Sir John Betjeman described it, is the Church’s preamble to Lent.

From today, we begin to make the long ascent through the foothills of the Church’s year up to Jerusalem and the waiting hill of Calvary.

Without Easter’s “promised primrose tide of praise”, the journey would be pointless, bitter, masochistic even and ultimately hopeless, for our journeying does not end in the ignominy of a dead man hanging on a cross, but with an empty hastily borrowed tomb in a nearby necropolis.

Journey’s end is God’s great, triumphant, outrageous invitation to live a new life; to live God’s New Creation, to be at one with the Risen Christ, the New Adam.

The ‘Gesima’ Sundays, Septuagesima, Sexagesima and Quinquagesima, are all but forgotten now, named but largely overlooked save for devotees of the Book of Common Prayer and, of course, John Betjeman’s rather splendid but also now overlooked poem.

These ‘foothill’ Sundays before we set foot on the more mountainous slopes of Lent, were introduced into the Church’s calendar by Saint Gregory the Great at a time of great distress, strife, and chaos – but they continue to provide us, through their week by week biblical reflections

with a tangible connection between a world ravaged and disordered by sin but redeemed by God in Christ Jesus.

The 'Gesima Sundays' were introduced to rouse the Church from complacency, to pull her up short and remind her, to remind us, the Body of Christ, that if we are courageous and bold enough to enter the wilderness desert of Lent with Christ, then we must not only be willing, but be ready and prepared for the journey.

What lies ahead through the next nine weeks is not a gentle Sunday afternoon stroll in The Regent's Park (although I hope there will be plenty of those), but a long spiritual slog through an inhospitable land full of wild beasts, a land where the devil, as a roaring lion, prowls about looking for someone to devour!<sup>i</sup>

At the beginning of Advent each year, we hear John the Baptist cry out 'Get Ready!', 'Prepare a way!' Get ready for the coming in Glory of the Son of Man.

Today on Septuagesima we must open our ears to hear another clarion call of 'Get Ready!' – get ready for Easter's primrose tide of praise. Get ready for Lent, get ready for a time of serious spiritual journeying; get ready to take stock of where we are in our relationships with God, our neighbours and ourselves. Get ready through self-examination and spiritual reflection, get ready to do some spiritual stock-taking and remember - in all things – and above all things - to get ready not relying on our own ability but on God's promised grace, God's promised forgiveness and God's promise of never-failing accompaniment underwritten by the eternal promise made visible in the empty tomb which lies beyond the cross.

'Septuagesima – seventy days  
To Easter's primrose tide of praise;  
The Gesimas – Septua, Sexa, Quinc  
Mean Lent is near, which makes you think.

Septuagesima – when we're told  
To “run the race”, to “keep our hold”,  
Ignore injustice, not give in, and practise stern self-discipline;

A somewhat unattractive time  
Which hardly lends itself to rhyme.  
But still it gives the chance to me  
To praise our dear old C. of E.

So other Churches please forgive  
Lines on the Church in which I live,  
The Church of England of my birth,  
The kindest Church to me on earth.

There may be those who like things fully  
Argued out, and call you “woolly”;  
Ignoring Creeds and Catechism  
They say the C. of E.'s “in schism”.

There may be those who much resent  
Priest, Liturgy, and Sacrament,  
Whose worship is what they call “free”,  
Well, let them be so, but for me  
There's refuge in the C. of E.

And when it comes that I must die  
I hope the Vicar's standing by,  
I won't care if he's “Low” or “High”  
For he'll be there to aid my soul  
On that dread journey to its goal,  
With Sacrament and prayer and Blessing  
After I've done my last confessing.

And at that time may I receive  
The Grace most firmly to believe,  
For if the Christian's Faith's untrue  
What is the point of me and you?  
But this is all anticipating  
Septuagesima – time of waiting,  
Running the race or holding fast.

Let's praise the man who goes to light  
The church stove on an icy night.

Let's praise that hard-worked he or she -  
The Treasurer of the P.C.C.

Let's praise the cleaner of the aisles,  
The nave and candlesticks and tiles.

Let's praise the organist who tries  
To make the choir increase in size, ---  
Or if that simply cannot be,  
Just to improve its quality.

Let's praise the ringers in the tower  
Who come to ring in cold and shower.

But most of all let's praise the few  
Who are seen in their accustomed pew  
Throughout the year, whate'er the weather,  
That they may worship God together.  
These, like a fire of glowing coals,  
Strike warmth into each other's souls,  
And though they be but two or three  
They keep the Church for you and me.

Amen.