

Worship @ Home

Sunday 30th August 2020



Worship Leader: Revd Val Reid

Reader: Anne Blackman

Music: Catriona Bevan

Technician: John Hamblin

Call to worship

God calls us to worship in spirit and in truth,
with both deep sadness and indescribable hope,
as we reflect on all that Jesus went through for us,
and praise God who goes beyond all expectations.
Amen.

Welcome

Opening hymn (StF 18)

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am God

Be still and know that I am God

I am the Lord who saves and heals

I am the Lord who saves and heals

I am the Lord who saves and heals

In You O Lord I put my trust

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In You O Lord I put my trust

Based on Psalm 46 10-11

Let us pray...

Thank you, Lord,
that you do not call us to anything
without also giving us the resources to cope.
You do not ask us to go anywhere you haven't been.

You call us to take up our cross,
and we come to you with fear and trembling,
but knowing that ultimately your way is the best.
Be with us, Lord, and help us to understand.
Amen.

Matthew 16: 21-28

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.' But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Prayer of confession

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that often I can be like Peter:
hearing your word but going off on my own track,
not wanting to see your path, especially if it looks rough.
Forgive me, Lord,
and set me on your path.

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that there are times when I want the world,
but don't give much thought to my soul.
Forgive me, Lord,
and help me to take up my cross.

Lord, I acknowledge before you
that there are times when
I am a stumbling block to others – and to myself;
times when I look for complications
instead of just following you.
Forgive me, Lord,
And help me to follow you.

Lord, I acknowledge before you
That sometimes I get stuck in my own feelings of inadequacy,
My conviction that I am not worthy to take up my cross and follow you.
If I stop for a moment, and listen, I can hear your still, small voice.
You are already forgiven.
You are already on my path.
Keep following.
I am with you always.
Amen.

Reflection

If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.

This is Saint Augustine, writing in the 4th century AD.
You would think we had learned nothing in the last sixteen hundred years!

In recent weeks we have been immersed in risk assessments.
Is it OK to start worshipping together again in our church building?
How many people can we fit in the sanctuary at two metres apart?
How will we stop ourselves popping over to talk to an old friend or a new visitor in another seat in a different bubble?
How many groups can use our premises on any one day?
Can two or more groups use the same toilets?
And what about testing for legionella?

Most of all – will we be safe?
Will those who step through our doors be invited into a house of healing?
Or might they pick up a deadly virus?

As we move out of lockdown, and explore what the new world order might look like – and feel like – we are faced with so many uncertainties.
Nothing is completely safe.
Nowhere is completely free of risk.

Is this just a matter of cleaning schedules and toilet rotas?
Or is there a deeper mind-set – and soul-set – that might help us cope?
What has our faith got to offer those of us who struggle with the changes and chances of this mortal life?

I have a lot of sympathy for Peter, that most loyal and honest and impulsive of disciples.
In last week's gospel reading it is Peter who is able to make the radical move, from reporting what other people say about Jesus, to a personal confession of faith.

Who do you say that I am?

In this week's reading Jesus invites him to reflect on what it means to be the Messiah.

This is the turning point in Matthew's gospel.
The moment when everything becomes shockingly clear.
When Jesus starts on the road to Jerusalem.
The road to betrayal and suffering and death.

This is not the kind of Messiah Peter imagined.
This is not the spiritual and political strategy he had set his hopes on.

*You are Peter,
and on this rock I will build my church,
and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*

But now everything is turned up-side down.

*Those who want to save their life will lose it,
and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

No wonder Peter rebukes Jesus.

*God forbid it, Lord!
This must never happen to you.*

How many times do we say the same thing?
About the things we were so attached to?
About our beloved church?
About all the things that were so much a part of the life of Christchurch, and that we can no longer do?

*God forbid it!
This must never happen to us!*

Surely the church is our defence against change and chance.
If we find risk and uncertainty even here – then where do we find our security?

One of our best guides to finding our way when we feel vulnerable and a bit lost, is John of the Cross.
He was a sixteenth century monk, known for his best-seller *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

John was a Carmelite, a religious order founded on the ideal of a simple life spent in solitude and prayer.
But by John's lifetime, the order had rather lost sight of its principles.
That first vision had been swamped by the very human desire for comfort, even luxury.
In 1562 Teresa of Avila founded a new Carmelite Convent, based on that original humble lifestyle.
She faced huge opposition from her sisters in the order, and from her male superiors.
John became her apprentice, and he founded a new reformed Carmelite monastery for men.
That too faced a lot of criticism from those in charge, who were perhaps a bit too much attached to their life of ease and comfort.

John was ordered to leave his post.
He refused.
He became an outlaw to his own order.
On the instructions of those in power, those with a lot to lose, John was abducted and imprisoned.
He lived in the dark, in solitary confinement, for nearly a year.
And it was here that he began to compose *The Dark Night of the Soul*.
He had to memorise his thoughts, as he had no paper and no ink.
When he at last escaped and fled to the south of Spain, he began to write down what he had learned in the dark.

And what he had learned was this:
The dark night of the soul is the place where you can really get to grips with seeking God.

Because you no longer have your ordered life,
the discipline of the monastery,
your friends and colleagues,
your status,
your doctrinal certainties,
...then you can recognise that all those things which you thought told you something of God are not much use at all.
You are grasping after something which cannot be grasped.
If you have understood, then what you have understood is not God.

In John's native Spanish, his word for God is *nada*.
No-thing.
God is not a thing that can be grasped, understood, defined.
God can only be encountered.
The reality that eclipses all other things.

Peter wants to define who Jesus is.
He has a fixed idea of what a Messiah should do and be.
Jesus knows that it is only by letting go of those certainties that he can truly follow him.
Truly encounter the God who sent him.

It's a hard lesson.

I think COVID has brought us to a similar place this year.
All the things that we thought we understood, that gave us a sense of security, of reliability, have been overturned.
We are groping our way towards what we hope will be a new normal.
But we have no idea what that will be like.
For ourselves, our church, our community, our world.

I think perhaps we have been gifted a new dark night of the soul.
Phyllis Tickle, American writer and thinker on theology and spirituality, says that every half a millennium or so the church has a great jumble sale of ideas.
It cleans out its cupboards and throws out all the stuff it no longer needs.
According to her, the last jumble sale happened 500 years ago – when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, and began what we now call the Protestant Reformation.
No-one knows quite what to call the great jumble sale that we are living through at the moment.
What will we throw out?
What will we hang on to?

Jesus was asking Peter not to cling on to his old ideas and hopes.
Not to clutch at the religious traditions he had inherited, to the stories the people of Israel had told themselves for generations about the coming of the Messiah.
He was asked to step into the dark night of the soul.
To let go of all his certainties.
To simply go with Jesus.
To set his face towards Jerusalem.
To trust that God was there in the darkness.
That it was only through death that resurrection could ever be possible.

There are not many people queuing up to be told what God is not.
Most of us are in the self-help section of the bookshop, looking for the guide which will tell us how to survive, how to thrive, how to do well, how to be well, how to be happy.

John of the Cross tells us to let go of all that, and to listen in the darkness for a voice that perhaps we will not recognise.

Perhaps it will be so quiet we can barely hear it.

Perhaps it will be silent for so long that we think there is no-one there.

Perhaps, like Jesus on the cross, we will think we have been forsaken.

But he says that the dark night is God's best gift.

It is intended for our liberation.

If we can be free of our certainties,

our rituals,

our tactics for manipulating God,

our assumptions about who God is and what the church should be,

all our substitutes for God (which get in the way of actually encountering God),

then perhaps we might hear what God has to say.

God puts out the lights to keep us safe, says John of the Cross.

Because we are never more in danger of stumbling than when we think we know where we are going.

So as we move into a new Church year on Tuesday, with no idea what might be ahead, I think we are all invited to use this space in our lives.

We have had to give up the church stuff that kept us secure – the groups, the meetings, the activities, the rotas.

I hope and trust and pray that, in the *nada*, we will encounter God.

Amen.

Prayers for ourselves and others – using Hymn 662 (StF)

For our prayers this morning, I invite you to use this lovely contemporary hymn to help you focus on the choice you make day by day to follow Jesus.

Catriona will play each verse and chorus through on the cello, and you may want to sing along at home, or to read the words on the screen as she plays.

After each verse and chorus, there will be a short silence, and I will invite you to use that verse as a way into prayer.

Let us pray...

Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Are you still prepared to follow?

Have you made a choice to remain and serve,

though the way be rough and narrow?

**Will you walk the path that will cost you much
and embrace the pain and sorrow?**

**Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
the disciples of tomorrow?**

How do you feel about the huge changes we have been through in the last months, as individuals, as church, and as a society?

Ask God to reassure you that you are not alone on this journey...

Silence...

Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
when the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground
when the crowds are turning violent?
**Will you walk the path that will cost you much
and embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
the disciples of tomorrow?**

Have you read things in the papers, or seen things on social media, that make you angry?
Have you thought that the church should be speaking truth to power?
We are the church!
Ask God to show you how you can be a voice for love, for peace, for justice...

Silence...

In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?
Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
will you share your faith with the faithless?
**Will you walk the path that will cost you much
and embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
the disciples of tomorrow?**

One of our priorities at Christchurch is to explore ways to re-start Open Church, and to make it a place where the
lonely, the anxious, the isolated, the frazzled can come and share a cup of coffee and a conversation.
Where prayer might be offered.
Where the peace of God might be found.
Is this something you could be a part of?
Ask God to show you...

Silence...

Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
and believe it could be different?
Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?
**Will you walk the path that will cost you much
and embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
the disciples of tomorrow?**

We are all citizens of the world.
The COVID pandemic has shown us that no-one is an island, and that we all share responsibility for our health, our
community, our planet.
Do you pray for what you see on the news?
Will you?

Silence...

**We will walk the path that will cost us much
and embrace the pain and sorrow.
We will trust in One who entrusts to us
the disciples of tomorrow.**

Jacqueline G Jones

Lord's prayer

I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.

Use whichever version you are familiar with.

Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.

Although we are apart, we join together in praying the prayer that Jesus gave us.

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.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Blessing

Lord God, you knew what was going to happen to you.
You didn't flinch, or back away.
You calmly told the disciples – and us – what to expect.
As we go out now, remind us constantly to look to you in the good and the tough times.
Guide us as we go in your name. **Amen.**

*Some prayers are from ROOTS for Churches 30.8.20
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