

## Worship @ Home

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Third Sunday in Lent

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**Reader:** Heather MacMillan

**Music:** Tom Nichol

**Technology:** Steve Cook



### Call to worship

We have come into this place to worship God.

Have we come ready to grow?

**We have!**

Have we come willing to change?

**We have!**

Are we prepared to put our faith into action,  
to worship God in all we do?

**We are!**

### Welcome

#### Music [StF 110]

In the wonder of creation,  
when all nature shares one song,  
showing God's imagination,  
all may see his love goes on.  
Through the Holy Story spoken,  
of God's people called as one,  
gathered, exiled, saved and broken,  
this we learn: His love goes on.

In the Christ who died to save us;  
in God's risen, living Son;  
through the Spirit, whom he gave us;  
this we know: His love goes on.  
In the telling of the Gospel,  
Matthew, Mark and Luke and John  
join the Church in testifying  
through the years, his love goes on.

From the perfect days of gladness  
when the sun has brightly shone,  
To the slog of working madness,  
All the while his love goes on.  
Through the dark days of depression  
When all sign of faith is gone,  
Hope may find no fresh expression,  
But we trust his love goes on.

Through the hopes of our tomorrows  
And the things we've left undone –  
Future joys and present sorrows –  
Through all time his love goes on.  
In our kingdom-shaped endeavour  
When God's glorious work is done,  
To the promise of forever  
God is here: his love goes on.

*Andrew T Murphy*

### **Gathering Prayer: Just as we are**

Lord, you know our hearts and minds;  
We don't need fancy words to speak to you;  
We don't need fine clothes to meet with you.

When we put conditions on how to worship,  
When the instruction manual becomes our gospel,  
When we put obstacles in the path of those who would come to you,

Forgive us.

Your anger in the temple shows us how much you care:  
That everyone is welcome,  
That **you** are wherever **we** are.

You are love unlimited, always accessible.  
We are grateful that we can turn to you  
In the dead of night, from the depths of our lowest moments,  
And know we will find love, understanding, comfort and acceptance,  
Just as we are.

Thank you.  
Amen.

### ***Psalm 19 – the heavens are telling the glory of God***

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

**Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.**

There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
**yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.**

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

**Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and nothing is hidden from its heat.**

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;

**the decrees of the LORD are sure,  
making wise the simple;**  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
**the commandment of the LORD is clear,  
enlightening the eyes;**  
the fear of the LORD is pure,  
enduring for ever;  
**the ordinances of the LORD are true  
and righteous altogether.**  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
**sweeter also than honey,  
and drippings of the honeycomb.**

Moreover by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward.  
**But who can detect their errors?  
Clear me from hidden faults.**  
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;  
do not let them have dominion over me.  
**Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression.**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable to you,  
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

**Music:** 'How clearly the sky' (Paul Arnold) <http://travellinglight.org.uk/song/how-clearly-the-sky/>

### **John 2: 13-22**

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money-changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a market-place!' His disciples remembered that it was written, 'Zeal for your house will consume me.' The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' The Jews then said, 'This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?' But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

## Reflection

Once upon a time there lived a poor woodcutter and his family.

Times were hard, and there was a great famine in the land.

One evening, they were down to their last loaf of bread.

*Listen*, said the mother, *if we do nothing we will all starve.*

*Tomorrow morning, early, we must take the children into the forest, far from home, and leave them there.*

*They will never find their way back.*

*They must fend for themselves.*

*At least that way there is a chance that we might all survive.*

Hansel and Gretel were listening through the wall.

Hansel crept out and collected a pocketful of small white pebbles.

Next morning, when their parents led them into the forest, he left a trail to guide them home.

Well, you know the story, I assume.

How the following day Hansel's trail of breadcrumbs was eaten by birds.

So the children were well and truly lost.

How they wandered in the forest until they found a house made of gingerbread.

How the hungry brother and sister ate pieces of the house.

And were captured by the witch who owned it.

How they were held prisoner, and fattened up ready to be cooked for her supper.

How Gretel (I'm glad the girl has a starring part at last!) tricked the witch and threw her into the oven instead.

And how they found her hidden treasure, and lived happily ever after.

The story of Hansel and Gretel was recorded by the Brothers Grimm, and published in 1812.

Like so many of their dark tales, it has lived on in our collective imagination.

Though a few years ago a survey of British parents put it top of the list of fairy tales too scary to be read to children!

Although the Brothers Grimm wrote it down in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century during the Romantic craze for capturing traditional stories and customs, it dates from much earlier.

The story first circulated as a folk tale in the very early part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

It was a time of the Black Death.

Famine.

Peasants with no means of earning a living.

Decimated families.

Extreme survival strategies.

Children abandoned because their parents were too poor to feed them.

Cannibalism as a desperate last resort.

And a few wealthy landowners monopolising all the wealth and the food.

So the story of Hansel and Gretel should be heard in this context.

As a parable challenging the exploitative feudal system.

Overthrowing those who clung on to power and prosperity (that's the witch) at the expense of those who were trapped by their class and their poverty (that's the children and their parents).

When you understand the context, Hansel and Gretel is, at heart, a revolutionary Marxist fable.

Context is also important when we listen to the gospel writers' accounts of the life of Jesus.

Today's story of Jesus overturning the tables of the money changers in the temple appears in all four of the gospels.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke it comes at the end.

When Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time.

When he is facing the combined wrath of the religious and political leaders.

When he has nothing left to lose.

In John's gospel it comes at the beginning, at the start of his ministry.

It's what provokes their antagonism in the first place.

His target in all four versions is the temple marketplace.

This was probably located in the Outer Court of the Gentiles.

Jesus wouldn't have been surprised to find buying and selling going on there.

Commercial activity was an entirely normal part of cultic practice.

The Jerusalem temple was fundamentally an economic institution.

It provided employment for curtain makers, barbers, incense manufacturers, goldsmiths, currency exchangers, sellers of animals for sacrifices.

But Jesus identifies two particular groups of temple entrepreneurs for his enacted parable.

*He ... poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables.*

*He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here!  
Stop making my Father's house a market-place!'*

Jerusalem was a centre for Jewish pilgrims from all over the known world.

Money changers changed their Greek or Roman currency into the Jewish coins in which temple dues had to be paid.

They represented the oppressive financial institutions which made a living out of the pilgrims, the travellers, the foreigners.

Those selling doves – well doves were the sacrifice of choice for the poor.

They were primarily used for the purification of women, and the cleansing of lepers.

They were the cheapest sacrifice you could offer.

Those already marginalised by gender or by illness, were further disadvantaged by the temple monopoly on selling 'perfect' doves, approved for use in the temple.

What Jesus is protesting about is not just the high prices.

The double jeopardy of being female and poor.

Or diseased and poor.

Or foreign and poor.

It's the whole edifice of organised religion.

The idea that God can be trapped and tamed and sold.

That the religious authorities are colluding with business interests to make a profit.

And to make a profit out of those very people that they should be looking out for.

The political and economic context of this story nudges us into reading it as an enacted parable. Jesus consistently identifies with the poor, the sick, the women, the foreigners, those on the edge of society.

Here, in one dramatic gesture, he takes their side against the vested interests that further impoverish their lives.

Just as Gretel pushes the capitalist witch into the oven which was intended to roast little girl for supper.

Just as the Black Lives Matter protesters pulled down the statue of Bristol slave-trader Edward Colston, and threw it into the harbour where his boats used to be moored.

Was that a powerful protest against tainted money?

Or was it criminal damage worth £3,750 which should be prosecuted?

Their trial began in Bristol Crown Court on February 8<sup>th</sup> – watch this space.

The lectionary asks us to consider this story during Lent.

A time when we are traditionally invited to give up the things which get in the way of truth.

Often the things we give up are the trappings of a capitalist society – luxury food, consumer spending, throwaway plastic, technology.

But John takes us a stage further.

When those watching ask Jesus what warrant he has for his actions, he replies:

*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*

*He was talking of the temple of his body, John tells us, in an authorial aside.*

God is located in me, Jesus says.

In my vulnerable, mortal body.

It is this vulnerable body that takes the risk of challenging the exploitative temple practices.

And it is this vulnerable body that pays the price at the end of John's story, when the vested interests of religion, commerce and politics take their revenge.

But it is in this vulnerable body that you can discern the face of God.

So that leaves us with some profound Lenten questions.

Which tables should we be overturning today?

What are the vested interests in our society that we need to challenge?

And how should we challenge them in a way that makes a difference?

What would Jesus do?

In our Lent Group last Sunday we reflected on this story.

We listened to the voice of David Haslam, a Methodist minister who chained himself to the furniture in South Africa House, to protest against Apartheid.

I shared the storey of a young Quaker activist who lived in one of the Hinde Street communities.

He asked me if some colleagues of his could sleep on the floor of the church one weekend – they were planning to superglue themselves to the entrances of the Arms Fair at the Exel Centre, as a protest against the arms trade.

In 2018 I went with two of the London District Chairs and a group of other Methodist ministers to London's Pride parade.

We wore our dog collars, painted rainbows on our cheeks, and danced to Abba songs in front of a group who were preaching homophobia.

What sort of protests should Christians engage in?

Should we talk about injustice?

Pray about it?

Write to our MPs about it?

Should we rely on the ballot box in a democracy?

Should we join in protest marches?

Should we literally overturn tables?

Or statues?

There are no easy answers.

We have to think about what issues we care passionately about.

We can't all do everything.

We have to decide what protests we feel are justified.

And we have to count the cost.

But it's not just the secular culture.

Jesus takes his protest right to the heart of the religious practice of his day.

What tables should we be overturning in our own churches?

And one final, pertinent question.

In whose vulnerable bodies can we discern the face of God?

Amen

#### **Music [StF 701]**

Heaven shall not wait

For the poor to lose their patience,

The scorned to smile, the despised to find a  
friend:

Jesus is Lord:

He has championed the unwanted;

In him injustice confronts its timely end.

Heaven shall not wait

For the rich to share their fortunes,

The proud to fall, the elite to tend the least:  
Jesus is Lord;

He has shown the master's privilege –

To kneel and wash servants' feet before they  
feast.

Heaven shall not wait

For the dawn of great ideas,

Thoughts of compassion divorced from cries of  
pain;

Jesus is Lord

He has married word and action;

His cross and company make his purpose plain.

Heaven shall not wait

For triumphant hallelujahs,

When earth has passed and we reach another  
shore:

Jesus is Lord

In our present imperfection;

His power and love are for now, and then for  
evermore.

*John L Bell and Graham Maule*

### **A prayer of thanksgiving**

We thank you, Lord, for the times when you have knocked us off our pedestals.  
Thinking we are wise, we have trusted in our own understanding rather than yours.  
You have bulldozed our 'castles in the air' to bring us down to earth.  
Praise be that, time after time, you have driven our falseness and foolishness away  
with cords of truth and righteousness, freeing us to be your Church without walls,  
open to all and ever expanding.

### **Prayers for ourselves and others**

Lord of the universe,  
we pray for our world broken by persecution, warfare and strife.  
We commend to you the Uighur people in China,  
the people of Myanmar, the people of Yemen.  
You desire harmony within and between nations;  
you yearn for everyone to know security and safety.  
Lord of the world and the church:  
**bring healing and peace.**

Lord of the poor and the rich,  
we pray for those who live and labour in developing countries  
paid less than the amount they need to survive.  
We commend to your tender love those who are exploited,  
children who are paid pennies, those who work in sweatshops.  
You desire justice for all people;  
you yearn for all people to be treated fairly and equitably.  
Lord of the world and the church:  
**bring healing and peace.**

Lord of the doctor and the patient,  
we pray for our world at this time of pandemic.  
We commend to you those who are suffering as a result of Covid-19;  
those who are working to combat the Brazilian mutation;  
those who are frightened and stressed out.  
You desire wholeness and health for all people;  
you yearn for an end to the pandemic.  
Lord of the world and the church:  
**bring healing and peace.**

Lord of the chapel and the cathedral,  
we pray for all places of worship throughout the world.  
We commend to you caretakers and cleaners, treasurers and guides.  
You desire holiness in your children  
and in the places in which they worship.

Lord of the world and the church:  
**bring healing and peace.**

Lord of all in need,  
we bring to you the prayers of our hearts.  
We commend to you those about whom we are especially concerned,  
praying for...  
You desire that your children care for one another.  
Lord of the world and the church:  
**bring healing and peace.**

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

### **The Lord's prayer**

#### **Sending out prayer**

We came together to worship God.  
We have heard God's Word.  
We have prayed and sung songs.  
Now we go into God's world:  
to be God's people wherever we are called to go.  
Let us go in Christ's name.  
Amen.

#### **Music [StF 717]**

We do not hope to ease our minds  
By simple answers, shifted blame,  
While Christ is homeless, hungry, poor,  
And we are rich who bear his name.  
As long as justice is a dream  
And human dignity denied,  
We stand with Christ; disturb us still  
Till every need is satisfied.  
Till every need is satisfied.

We cannot ask to live at peace  
In comfort and security  
While Christ is tried in Pilate's hall  
And drags his cross to Calvary.  
As long as hatred stifles truth

And freedom is betrayed by fear,  
We stand with Christ; give us no peace  
Till his peace reigns in triumph here.  
Till his peace reigns in triumph here.

We will not pray to be preserved  
From any depth of agony  
While Christ's despairing cry rings out:  
God, why have you abandoned me?  
As long as we have hope to share  
Of life renewed beyond the pain,  
We stand with Christ through all the night  
Till Easter morning dawns again.  
Till Easter morning dawns again.

*Marnie Barrell*

*Prayers are taken from Roots for Churches 7.3.21  
and the URC Prayer Handbook 2021: Conversations.*

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