

Service Order for Christchurch on 14th March 2021 at 10.30am

Our call to worship is based on psalm 107. It tells of the tough times that the people have had, but that they've been carried through by the Father God's sustaining and nurturing love. I invite you to join in with the words in bold type

Call to Worship *Adapted from Psalm 107:1-3,17-22.*

Give thanks to God, for God is good;

All: God's love endures forever.

Let all who know God tell of their story;

**All: from east and west, from north and south,
we will tell our story.**

When we cried to God in our trouble,

God saved us from our distress;

God sent out the Word and healed us.

Let us give thanks for God's unfailing love,

and tell of God's works,

with songs of joy in worship.

And our first hymn does exactly that – it gives us an opportunity to sing out of our love for God who is awesome, who knows who we truly are and continues to love us.

Hymn StF 48 From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea,

From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea,
creations revealing Your majesty.

From the colours of fall to the fragrance of spring,
every creature unique in the song that it sings,

All exclaiming:

*Indescribable, uncontainable
you placed the stars in the sky
and You know them by name.*

*You are amazing, God,
all powerful, untameable.*

Awestruck we fall to our knees

As we humbly proclaim,

You are amazing, God.

Who has told every lightning bolt where it should go
 or seen heavenly storehouses laden with snow?
 Who imagined the sun and gives source to its light
 Yet, conceals it to bring us the coolness of night?
 None can fathom.

*Indescribable, uncontainable
 you placed the stars in the sky
 and You know them by name.
 You are amazing, God,
 incomparable, unchangeable.
 You see the depths of my heart
 and you love me the same;
 you are amazing, God.*

Laura Story and Jesse Reeves

Spring is inching forward – the buds on the trees and shrubs are swelling up, daffodils are flowering – but we’re living constrained lives – still under lockdown but creeping forward as schools are now back open and we can meet up with someone outside and have a coffee. Hopefully, we have a comfortable place to live, with sufficient food, clothes to keep us warm, things to entertain ourselves with, and if we are of paid employment age then we’re in work. But I wonder how many times have we grumbled about our circumstances during this past week. Perhaps about the hours spent on virtual meetings, not being able to physically meet up with our friends and family. Do we feel that we’re on the threshold of life looking at it passing us by? We grumble, we feel frustrated. Though we’re inching forward to further relaxation of rules, it still feels hard. And this so much reminds me of the Israelites out in the wilderness grumbling against Moses and God, even though God provided all that they needed. Are we a mix of the same? Let’s pray

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Creator God,
 we come together
 as witnesses to your glory,
 as bearers of your good news,
 as hopeful children,
 as loving friends,
 as a community seeking your wisdom.
 In a world of frustration and pain
 we look to your guiding hand

for support and strength,
for comfort and healing.
Direct us and lead us
as we walk through this life
attempting to live in the way
to which you have called us.
Forgiving God,
redeemer and companion,
we gather together,
hopefully and sorrowfully,
comfortable and uncomfortable,
carefree and troubled,
to confess our love,
to confess our adoration,
to confess our failings,
to confess that we try,
to confess that we are greedy,
to confess that we are generous,
to confess that we are selfish,
and to confess that we are caring.
Though we live in a world
where anger and hurt
are commonplace,
where neighbour is set against neighbour
and the future is uncertain,
we look to your guiding hand,
for reassurance and understanding,
for hope and for joy,
as we walk through this life,
attempting to live in the way
to which you have called us.
Amen.

Introduction to Readings:

We're going to listen consecutively to our two readings.
Our first one is from the book of Numbers in the Old Testament. The Israelites are in the wilderness, lost between the relative bounty of Egypt, and the promise of Canaan. The people have been freed from slavery, met by God and

are on their way to the promised land. And they have just had a successful military victory. But as we hear they are not satisfied and do not trust. And then our New Testament reading is from John's Gospel. Nicodemus, a prominent pharisee comes in the night to meet up with Jesus. He might have witnessed or certainly would have heard about Jesus actions in the temple that we read about last week. And perhaps from this and other hearsay, Nicodemus has a burning desire to find out more. Let's listen.

Readings:

Numbers 21 4-9 from The Message

They set out from Mount Hor along the Red Sea Road, a detour around the land of Edom. The people became irritable and cross as they travelled. They spoke out against God and Moses: "Why did you drag us out of Egypt to die in this godforsaken country? No decent food; no water—we can't stomach this stuff any longer."

So God sent poisonous snakes among the people; they bit them and many in Israel died. The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke out against God and you. Pray to God; ask him to take these snakes from us." Moses prayed for the people.

God said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it on a flagpole: Whoever is bitten and looks at it will live."

So Moses made a snake of fiery copper and put it on top of a flagpole. Anyone bitten by a snake who then looked at the copper snake lived.

John 3 14-21 from The Message

In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him.

“This is the crisis we’re in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won’t come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.”

Reflection

For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son:

our world,
our angry world,
our fearful world,
our unequal world,
our hurtful world,
our poor world,
our rich world,
our joyless world,
our joyful world.

For God so loved the world
that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him
shall not perish but have eternal life.

For God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn the world:

our world,
our world of sorrow,
our world of pain,
our world of crying,
our world of laughing,
our world of war,
our world of peace,
our world of greed,
our world of charity.

For God did not send his Son
into the world to condemn the world,
but to save the world through him. Amen

Sermon part 1

Standing on the threshold of the dispensary that his mother ran in a village in Kenya, my husband, Andrew, lobbed in the black rubber snake that one of his relatives had posted to him for his birthday present. He was 5 years old. The cacophony that erupted was apparently a sight to behold as people scrambled to launch themselves over the threshold and escape what they thought was the presence of a black mamba – the fourth most venomous snake in the world. No pausing, no procrastinating, no hesitation – fear drove everyone out of the dispensary.

And this week's Old Testament focus is a perplexing. In many ways it goes against the grain of what we hope God to be yet confirms a populist version of a vengeful and even petty Almighty. All the obvious questions have to be asked. Why does God send the snakes? Is the infestation of lethal snakes an appropriate form of punishment? Is it not a rather sinister ploy for a god to create a disease where only that god has the antidote? And even more, the snake problem is not irradiated but always there as a reminder for anyone who wishes to complain in the future.

As with all biblical passages, they are written from the experience and emotions of God's People with the holy spirit. These are the retelling of experiences in the life of Israel in the desert that the Israelites themselves could not understand or explain. That is a good place to be at times for us: to know the bible offers us passages written in a crisis where meaning is hard to find.

We have the experience of a global pandemic. It has reshaped us and will continue to do so from governments, to communities, to economy, to faith. It is something we may never understand in an existential way, but we seek ways to grow from. We stand on the threshold and look out, wondering which way to tread, what choices to make.

Perhaps one of the dangers of this passage is the sense that the snakes remain. The struggles remain. In our reading Moses makes and then places a fiery copper snake onto a pole. Its role is to bring the people back to God, to remind them that their trust and focus should be on Him. So what do the snakes mean for us? Is it that, rather than God simply removing the problem, we are called to look upon our wrongdoing, the pain and hurt we cause due to the lifestyles we choose to lead. Facing the issue,

standing on the threshold, fixing our focus on God, is often the starting point towards renewal and growth in our communities and individually and then we can begin to heal. In some bigger sense this reading from Numbers, then, is a story about dealing with sin, hurt, pain in the world. We can't avoid it. We are called to face it, to bring God into these messy, painful situations so that we can then begin to grow and find a path to follow.

Nicodemus appears also to be on that threshold as he chooses to visit Jesus at night. Though he is a religious leader, something is lacking. He is educated, well-connected, respected. He's unlike some Pharisees Jesus has criticized for hypocrisy, the ones who thought they had nothing left to learn, that there was no room for growth, that they never made a mistake, that God was on their side. Nicodemus is far less certain. He wants something more.

Why does Nicodemus come at night? Did he have to work all day? Is he afraid for people to see him—a religious leader—looking for something new, so he comes under cover of darkness? Or is night the time when his yearnings for something more get the better of him? He is hesitant. He doesn't know what he needs, but his yearning sends him on this journey in the dark. He ends up knocking on the door of the house where Jesus is staying—that rabbi who sounds so engaging.

Here's a painting of Nicodemus visiting Christ, painted by Henry Ossawa Tanner, an African American artist. His father was a prominent minister and later an Episcopalian bishop and his mother a former slave who escaped the South through the Underground Railroad. This painting was particularly important to Tanner. For it reminded him and so many others of the days when slaves were not allowed either to have formal church services or to read the Bible, and so they choose to meet to worship at night.

Jesus is sat on the low wall surrounding the roof terrace. Nicodemus sits on a stool, a student of Jesus. Now the light in this painting does not come from above but from within, from the rooftop staircase. The highlights of Jesus' face shine as he speaks and gestures in near-darkness. As Jesus speaks, the light of the world enters the darkness of Nicodemus's ignorance.

We initially listen to Nicodemus' earth-bound questions and understanding – he struggles with the intangible, but he wants to understand. I wonder, does Nicodemus use the questions to procrastinate, to put off making the choice to leave his safe, comfortable life that he has carved out. Nicodemus in this reading still hesitates, he remains teetering on the threshold, the threshold of

eternal life that trust in God offers us. Later though in John's Gospel, we read that he becomes a secret disciple of Jesus, risking his career to perform the humble service along with Joseph of Arimathea, to request and care for Jesus body after his crucifixion.

Many of us will feel that we've given up so much during lockdown, that we've suffered and struggled. At times we might have felt close to God, at other times we've wondered where on earth God is. Lift up your eyes to God, Moses commanded, Jesus commanded. And so humbly we do so as we join together in the prayer that Jesus taught us – the Lord's prayer.

The Lord's Prayer

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.
 Save us from the time of trial
 and deliver us from evil.
 For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
 now and for ever. Amen

Our next hymn is called 'For this I have Jesus' written by Graham Kendrick. We're listening to a video because we think it's a new song for Christchurch. So why this song? At times when we're going through difficulties, it's easy to blame others. But in this song, we're reminded that we need to bring our anxieties to Christ.

We all lean on something, particularly when the hard times come. The question is the quality of what we are leaning on. Our readings this morning tell us that we were never made to be simply independent of God, we're made for God, and to find fulfilment in a relationship with him. Without that, we are incomplete, and we haven't fulfilled the purpose of our existence. Here's the song.

Hymn: For this I have Jesus,

For the joys and for the sorrows
 The best and worst of times
 For this moment, for tomorrow
 For all that lies behind
 Fears that crowd around me
 For the failure of my plans
 For the dreams of all I hope to be
 The truth of what I am

For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus
For this I have Jesus, I have Jesus
 (Repeat)

For the tears that flow in secret
 In the broken times
 For the moments of elation
 Or the troubled mind
 For all the disappointments
 Or the sting of old regrets
 All my prayers and longings
 That seem unanswered yet

For the weakness of my body
 The burdens of each day
 For the nights of doubt and worry
 When sleep has fled away
 Needing reassurance
 And the will to start again
 A steely-eyed endurance
 The strength to fight and win *Graham Kendrick*

Sermon part 2

So, what challenge or challenges, that are so great, that they keeps us teetering on the threshold, preventing us from following the path of eternal life? Eternal life meaning a full life that is lived now, in the present. A life that is God led and God present. A life that is lived as God would wish us do in this very moment.

Eternal life is not an 'opt out' to being involved in our communities. Living an eternal life means we're drawn deeper into this precious world. John tells us that God so loved the world that he gave his Son so that we might be saved. And all who choose to put their trust in Him has eternal life – a whole and lasting life. We recall our sister and Local Preacher Rita Hayes who has recently passed. She fully lived life in service of God and will be much missed.

The Israelites regained their trust in God, they acknowledged their sins and sought to follow the path to eternal life. Amidst the darkness of the night, Nicodemus learnt of God's love and chose to step out and follow. The Good News for us is that we are fully loved, just as we are. And knowing our Saviour's love for us means that we must love others – it's not a selective love. And it means we also need to show that love. This photo of the nun in Myanmar, on her knees before the military might, is such a powerful representation.

What action are we called to take, both individually and as a church community? Our beliefs and actions need to be integrated.

As we inch forward out of lockdown, we pray for the strength to keep our hearts and minds focused on our Lord, our Saviour, the bringer of eternal life so that we might dare to leave the threshold and move forwards with courage and hope. Amen

intercessions

Loving God,
just as Moses prayed for your people,
we come together in prayer;
look upon us with care and compassion,
shine your light on us that we might live.
Out of the darkness of fear, your people
seek support and reassurance,
as the world continues to struggle with
war, poverty, disease, and hate.
We pray for all those who are fearful;
for all those wondering what
tomorrow may bring.
Help them to have hope,
embolden them and guide them,

and grant us the strength to
be constant companions to all those
in need of your love.

In a time of confusion and strife,
when our communities and society
are struggling to find a new purpose,
a new way of caring for and loving one another,
we pray for all those who are frustrated,
those who desire a different,
more peaceful world,
more compassionate communities,
and a more equal society.

We pray for all those who are angry,
for those who see and know injustice,
but have little power to create change.
We pray for all those who have been left behind
in communities and a society
of great wealth and education for some
and poverty and exclusion for others.
Help them to have satisfaction and justice
in your eternal love and understanding,
and grant us the strength to
be constant companions to all those
in need of your love.

As our world changes,
and your church continues
to search for its place
at the heart of our communities,
we pray for those seeking wisdom,
seeking a way forward,
to carry out your mission,
and spread your word,
and carry your love to the whole world.
Help them to find new paths,
and reinvigorate what they have long known,
and grant us the strength to
be constant companions to all those
in need of your love.

Amen.

Hymn StF 59 Lord, the light of your love is shining

Lord, the light of your love is shining,
 in the midst of the darkness, shining:
 Jesus, Light of the world, shine upon us;
 set us free by the truth you now bring us -
 shine on me, shine on me.

*Shine, Jesus, shine,
 fill this land with the Father's glory;
 blaze, Spirit, blaze,
 set our hearts on fire.
 Flow, river, flow
 flood the nations with grace and mercy;
 send forth your word,
 Lord, and let there be light!*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence,
 from the shadows into your radiance;
 by the blood I may enter your brightness:
 search me, try me, consume all my darkness -
 shine on me, shine on me.

As we gaze on your kingly brightness
 so our faces display your likeness,
 ever changing from glory to glory:
 mirrored here, may our lives tell your story -
 shine on me, shine on me. *Graham Kendrick*

Blessing

Let's go in peace,
 with our eyes
 and our hearts
 focussed on the love of God,
 the grace of our Lord Jesus
 and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
 today, tomorrow, and always. Amen