

Christchurch Service 10:45am

11th July 2021

Welcome

Good morning everyone and welcome to worship here at Christchurch in Hitchin. It's wonderful to be with you this morning and to know that in different parts of our town, maybe our country and perhaps even our world we are praising God together right now. Welcome also to those who are perhaps watching this later in the day or the week and to those who will receive a DVD or CD of this service, whenever that is, it's good to be with you.

My name is Mandy Pye and I am a Worship Leader and Worship Area Lead here at Christchurch and I want to say a really big thank you to Helen Dearn, one of our Local Preachers in the North Herts Methodist Circuit who should have been standing here instead of me, but an important family event was brought forward to today and she is down in Somerset enjoying some precious family time. However, such is her dedication that she was committed to preparing this service before she went and I am pleased to be sharing her words with you today.

Our reader this morning is Anne Blackman, our musicians are Mike Crowley, Catriona Bevan and Lisa Morgan, all things technical are being looked after by Steve Cook and I am really pleased to welcome back our minister, Val Reid who has just returned from a 3month sabbatical but brings us her reflections on the scripture readings today.

It's good to see you Val and we look forward to hearing how God has blessed you during your time away from Christchurch.

Call to Worship

Ephesians 1:3-6 (The Message)

How blessed is God! And what a blessing he is! He's the Father of our Master, Jesus Christ, and takes us to the high places of blessing in him. Long before he laid down earth's foundations, he had **us** in mind, had settled on **us** as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt **us** into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted **us** to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving, by the hand of his beloved Son.

Hymn – StF 94 ‘To God be the glory’

1 To God be the glory, great things he has done:
so loved he the world that he gave us his son,
who yielded his life an atonement for sin,
and opened the life-gate that all may go in.

Refrain:

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the earth hear his voice!
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, let the people rejoice!
O come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
and give him the glory, great things he hath done.

2 O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
to every believer the promise of God.
And every offender who truly believes,
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Refrain

3 Great things he has taught us, great things he has done,
and great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son,
but purer, and higher, and greater will be
our wonder, our rapture, when Jesus we see.

Refrain

Frances Jane van Alstyne (Fanny Crosby)

Opening Prayers

God of glory, we come before you in praise and worship,
For you have adopted us as your own beloved children
And you promise us the unending joy of your love and your blessings
Poured out on us through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ
and through the guidance and help of your Holy Spirit.

All honour and glory are given to you through our worship today
And through our daily lives as we seek to be your disciples and witnesses
in the world you have given us to care for.

Yet, Lord, we so often fall short of the mark and let you down,
hurting ourselves and others in the process.
Lord, we are truly sorry for the times we have not proclaimed your truths
or have not shared the Good News of Jesus Christ as we should.

Forgive us for not standing strong in your truth
and for denying others the chance to know you as we know you
because we have kept silent or have not spoken out as we should.

Lord we are truly sorry and we come to you again to seek
that full and freely given forgiveness that is promised and assured.

And so, we also bring you our grateful thanks.
Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ to teach us and guide us,
to intercede for us and to cherish us.
Thank you for the gift of your Holy Spirit who encourages and empowers us,
who comforts us and gives us courage.
For you are our great and glorious God, in whom we find all we need
and from whom all blessings flow.

Amen

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.
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.

Introduction to OT Reading

Amos was a prophet to the people of Israel, probably around 760-750 BC. This was when Jeroboam was King of Israel and Uzziah was King of Judah.

His message was to the wealthy people of Israel who were enjoying peace and prosperity at the expense of the poor. They were even selling the poor into slavery if it suited their purposes. His warnings of impending judgement and justice were timely, for soon Israel would be conquered by Assyria and all people, even the rich, would be taken into slavery.

However, as we will see in the reading, people don't always like to be told the truth.

OT Reading - Amos 7: 7-15

This is what he showed me: The Lord was standing by a wall that had been built true to plumb, with a plumb line in his hand. And the Lord asked me, "What do you see, Amos?"

"A plumb line," I replied.

Then the Lord said, "Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.

"The high places of Isaac will be destroyed
and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;
with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam."

Amos and Amaziah

Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel:

"Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying:

"Jeroboam will die by the sword,
and Israel will surely go into exile,
away from their native land."

Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom."

Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.

Introduction to NT Reading

In the previous chapters of Mark's Gospel, Jesus has been demonstrating his power and his authority in the way he has been teaching his disciples and the crowds, and in how he has healed many people of physical, spiritual and mental illness. He has stilled the storm and he has challenged the religious authorities about their devotion to rules rather than their compassion for the people they are supposed to serve. He has even given the twelve disciples the chance to go out on their own and they have enjoyed much success in preaching, teaching and healing.

But he has also returned to his home town of Nazareth, and discovered that not everyone is willing to take his ministry and mission seriously.

But now Mark brings John the Baptist back into the picture. Mark hasn't mentioned him since the opening verses of Chapter 1, but now he tells us that Herod has heard of Jesus, and of the rumours that he is John, raised from the dead. This is difficult for Herod – and Mark fills us in with some of the back story. What is Jesus doing that hooks into Herod's feelings about John? What challenges does it throw up about his own way of life?

Mark 6: 14-29

John the Baptist Beheaded

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying, "John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

Others said, "He is Elijah."

And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!"

For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." So, Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally, the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests.

The king said to the girl, "Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom."

She went out and said to her mother, "What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request: "I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

Hymn – SoF 2380 'Break our hearts'

It's time for us to live the songs we sing
And turn our good intentions into action
To bring the kind of worship You desire
And move beyond our self-absorbed distractions

The mountains are shaking
Could this be a great awakening
Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
Wake us up to see through Your eyes
Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
And send us out to shine in the darkness

It's time to move outside our comfort zone
To see beyond our churches and our homes
To change the way we think and how we spend
Until we look like Jesus again

The mountains are shaking
Could this be a great awakening

Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
Wake us up to see through Your eyes
Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
And send us out to shine in the darkness

Here I am send me
To be Your hands and feet
Here I am send me I will go

The mountains are shaking
Could this be a great awakening

Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
Wake us up to see through Your eyes
Break our hearts
With the things that break Yours
And send us out to shine in the darkness

And send us out to shine in the darkness
And send us out to shine.

Vicky Beeching

Sermon (Val)

On Friday evening I settled down to watch the first ever episode of Mr Benn on You Tube.

I'd been chatting to a friend on Facebook about it, and I was delighted to discover it was still around!

Do you remember Mr Benn?

He was an unassuming, ordinary man in a bowler hat, who lived at number 52 Festive Road.

In 'Mr Benn and the Red Knight', Mr Benn is invited to a fancy dress party.

He goes searching for a costume to wear.

In an obscure little shop, he finds just the right outfit.

A red suit of armour.

Immediately he tries it on, he finds himself in a world where a friendly dragon has been banished from the king's palace.

A matchbox entrepreneur has falsely accused the dragon of arson, in order to create a monopoly of fire lighting equipment.

As soon as the dragon is gone, the price of matches starts to rise.

I hadn't clocked the Marxist undertones of Mr Benn when I watched it with my little sister in 1971!

Mr Benn in his red armour fearlessly rides to the palace and denounces the capitalist profiteer, who is thrown into the deepest, darkest dungeon.

The king goes to say sorry to the dragon.

The matchmaker's punishment is to supply matches free to all the people.

Everyone lives happily every after.

And Mr Benn takes off his armour and goes home to 52 Festive Road.

Somehow, this makes me think of Amos.

When the priest at the sanctuary of Bethel tells Amos to stop offering his challenging prophecies to the king and the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, he replies that he is just an ordinary man.

A herdsman.

A dresser of sycamore trees.

But something – someone – God – gave him the courage to speak out about the injustice he sees around him.

Just like Mr Benn and his suit of armour.

In Mr Benn and the Red Knight, the king and the people immediately recognise the injustice to the dragon, and take steps to put things right.

I imagine that the matchbox tycoon in the deepest darkest dungeon is not so pleased.

And I do wonder about the future of an economy in which he has to supply matches for free for ever.

But in ancient Israel, the reminder that the community has drifted a long way from God's ideals of justice and humanity is not welcome.

There is no handy individual to blame – they are all responsible.

So it is the prophet who is banished to the southern kingdom.

The compulsion to speak out about injustice and inhumanity is an important one for people of faith.

During the two years I have been here at Christchurch, I can think of quite a few examples.

At my first harvest festival, in September 2019, we focussed on Greta Thunberg. She had a global message of challenge about the climate crisis.

And at Christchurch we explored the theological issues that underpinned her prophetic message – our celebration of God the creator, our stewardship of the earth, our care for each other across the whole world.

Christchurch was already an eco-church, and our prophetic message was matched by the commitment of so many people to turn words into actions – to reduce, re-use and re-cycle.

Last summer, following the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter rallies were held across the US and the UK.

Here at Christchurch, in solidarity with our sisters and brothers, Eddy Selby curated a poster exhibition on our railings, celebrating the lives of Great Black Britons.

It made an important statement to our community, and caught the imagination of local schoolchildren and journalists alike.

On All Saints Day, last Autumn, I remember nominating Marcus Rashford as a modern-day saint, for his challenge to the government about food poverty.

Policy was changed because of his campaign.

And the work that many Christchurch members do for Helping Herts Homeless, the Hitchin Food Bank, and Phase, felt part of a bigger picture of prophetic witness.

So – yes – we are all called to hold up a plumb line to our society.

To challenge injustice.

To call out unfairness when we see it.

Even though, all too often, this is not necessarily an easy thing to do.

Amos, as we know, was told to take his unpopular message elsewhere.

John the Baptist ended up with his head on a plate.

But – and you'll know that in my view there is always a but – I think it's a bit more complicated than this.

Calling out injustice, holding up a plumb line to society, is indeed our calling.
Heard or unheard.
Popular or unpopular.
But deciding what constitutes injustice is perhaps not as simple as the plumb line image might suggest.

*This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand.
And the LORD said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?'
And I said, 'A plumb-line.'
Then the Lord said,
'See, I am setting a plumb-line
in the midst of my people Israel;*

This is a common pattern in the book of Amos.
God shows Amos something.
Amos doesn't really grasp its significance.
So God says, '*Amos, what do you see?*'

It's worth noting that the Hebrew word for a prophet is *hozeh*, which means a see-er.
Someone who sees.
Sees things differently.
Sees things from God's perspective.

So God says, '*Amos, what do you see?*'

Amos replies, *anak*.
Now pretty much every version of the English Bible translates this word as a plumb line.
A line with a lead weight on the end, to check whether a wall is straight or not.
A great image for God's perspective on whether or not society is shaping itself on God's values.

Anak is used four times in these two verses.
But actually the meaning of *anak* is not at all clear.
This is the only place in the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures that this word appears.
Recent scholarship has established that it is the Akkadian word for 'tin'.
But what meaning 'tin' might have in this context is a bit obscure.
'Plumb line' first appeared as a guess by medieval commentators, and has become the traditional rendering.
We know that *anak* is some kind of metal.
So why not?
It makes sense in a judgement oracle.

But it's still just our best guess.

The writer of the chapter on Amos from my New Interpreter's 12-volume bible commentary – Donald E Gowan – says that although plumb line has become the best known image from the book of Amos, it is simply inaccurate. It should be given up, he says emphatically.

I'm not so sure.

Whatever our views about the translator's difficult task, plumb line makes sense. It is in line with many of the other prophetic words to the people of Israel.

It is a powerful visual image.

We know that the relationship between the covenant people and God is constantly being stretched out of shape by their tendency to drift away from justice.

Why wouldn't a prophet hold up a plumb line to show them where they are going astray?

But the complication of getting the words right also flags up a wider issue for me. The complication of getting the message right.

When we read the Bible, we are always interpreters.

Sometimes the language is obscure.

Sometimes the message is at odds with other messages to different people in different times.

Sometimes we are called on to speak a prophetic word to our society about something which was simply unknown in Biblical times.

Take, for example, Boris Johnson's announcement this week that July 19th will be freedom day.

From that date there will be no more legal restrictions on our public behaviour.

We are free to travel on the tube or go to the pub without wearing a mask.

We are free to hug each other without restraint.

We are free to sing in church.

Facebook groups have been buzzing with excited Methodists, longing to belt out a Wesley Hymn or a worship song once more.

At last!

But I am wondering what our response should be.

COVID was unknown in Biblical times.

There are no prophetic words about dealing with a pandemic.

There are no rules in Deuteronomy or Leviticus about how to behave where there is a risk of passing on the Delta variant.

So how do we decide what to do and what to say?

There are some strict rules in Leviticus, for example, about how to treat lepers – a different, but very contagious disease.

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, 'Unclean, unclean.'

(Leviticus 13.45)

Should we suggest that this replaces mask-wearing in Waitrose?

But we also know that, famously, Jesus broke the rules when it came to lepers.

He talked to them.

He reached out and touched them.

He didn't stick to the social distancing rules.

So how do we approach the decisions we will have to make on this issue at Christchurch?

What key principles from the Bible can we apply?

What do we want to do to celebrate our freedom?

And what do we need to do to protect the most vulnerable members of our community?

What do we need to do to demonstrate solidarity and consideration and inclusiveness as we set out our future patterns of worship?

What does it mean to love our neighbour during a pandemic?

The Methodist Church has promised to provide some guidelines for future worship next week.

The URC has already offered a reflection in Friday's Weekly letter to ministers:

*We remind churches of the Great Commandments: **to love God with our whole being and love our neighbour as we love ourselves.***

All our actions must therefore be aimed at glorifying God and showing continuing care for others.

We cannot cast off all restraint and still fulfil those commandments.

It is therefore fully appropriate for us to continue some of the practices with which we have become familiar.

Deciding on how to respond requires a wide overview of what we think God is saying about our whole attitude to life.

It's never as easy as simply lifting a single rule out of context.

There is one more key principle I would like to apply.

Indeed, that I would like to speak a prophetic word about.

Last week, the Methodist Conference accepted the report 'God in Love Unites Us'.

I'll be summarising the report, and the next steps for Christchurch, at the church meeting on Tuesday.

But whatever our personal views on the content, the thing that has struck me most in the conversations and debates around this subject is the way that – mostly – people have listened to each other.

We have respected each other's opinions.

We have recognised that it is entirely possible to be committed Christians, and to hold different views on these matters.

That it is possible to take the Bible seriously, but not to be able to agree on how to interpret some of the details.

We have prioritised staying together as a community of faith over endless arguments about the 'right' answer.

Because from the formation of the covenant people in the Hebrew Scriptures, through to Jesus' calling of the men – and women – to create his new community, through to Paul's letters to his fledgling churches around the Mediterranean, how we live together in love is one of the golden rules which can be found throughout the pages of our Old and New Testaments.

I don't know where you are planning to be this evening.

At home with no more than six friends?

In the pub with a face mask?

At Hertford Castle watching on the big screen?

But I was interested to read in the paper yesterday morning that Gareth Southgate has been training the England team by getting them to read a book called 'Belonging – the ancient code of togetherness' by Owen Eastwood.

Eastwood is of Maori descent.

He writes about *whakapapa* (pronounced: far-ka-papa).

This is the Maori way of explaining your place in the world, in your tribe, in your family.

'Everybody has their arms interlocked,' he writes, *'so it's an unbreakable chain'.*

Southgate says: *we try to signal to players that this is a place where you belong.*

You are respected, this is a safe place.

We want you to be yourself and express yourself.

In a team that has origins in so many different countries and cultures, this is important.

Whether they win or lose tonight, they have already spoken a prophetic word to our nation about what it means to create unity in diversity.

And perhaps a prophetic word to the church too.

Amen.

Reflection time with gentle music

Prayers for Others

Prayer response.....

The Lord calls us to follow.

We walk in your strength, O Lord.

We pray for situations where we struggle to follow Christ, offering them to God in the silence. *Silence*

The Lord calls us to follow.

We walk in your strength, O Lord.

We pray for our country and the places where God seems absent. *Silence*

The Lord calls us to follow. **We walk... etc.**

We pray for our church, our home, our neighbourhood, and the struggles we have in centring our lives on the love of God. We offer into God's care the situations and people with whom we struggle. *Silence*

The Lord calls us to follow. **We walk... etc.**

We pray for areas of the world where Christians face persecution; and we pray for ourselves when we face situations where standing up for right is hard and painful. *Silence*

The Lord calls us to follow. **We walk... etc.**

We pray for people who find themselves alone, and for all who suffer, naming them before God and trusting in God's faithful love. *Silence*

The Lord calls us to follow. **We walk... etc.**

Amen.

Blessing

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ.

You have heard the word of truth,
the gospel of your salvation, and you have believed.
Go, and live to the praise of his glory. **Amen.**

Hymn – StF 682 ‘God of grace and God of glory’

1 God of grace and God of glory,
on thy people pour your power.
Crown your ancient church’s story,
bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the facing of this hour.

2. Heal your children’s warning madness;
bend our pride to your control;
shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
rich in things and poor in soul.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
lest we miss your Kingdom’s goal.

3. Lo! the hosts of evil round us
scorn your Christ, assail his ways!
Fears and doubts too long have bound us,
free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage,
for the living of these days.

Harry Emerson Fosdick