

Worship@Home

Sunday 22nd August 2021

10.45am livestream



Worship at Christchurch
with Val Reid, Sunday 22nd August
Two services, one theme: *Building a
house for God – what is a church for?*
10.45am YouTube & 4pm in Church*

www.christchurchhitchin.org.uk/youtube

1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11, 22-30, 41-43 & John 6:56-69

* Pre-booking required

Call to worship

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

Music StF 680

Come, Host of heaven's high dwelling place
Come, earth's disputed guest;
Find in this house a welcome home,
Stay here and take your rest.

Surround these walls with faith and love
That through the nights and days,
When human tongues from speaking cease,
These stones may echo praise.

Bless and inspire those gathered here
With patience hope and peace,
And all the joys that know the depth
In which all sorrows cease.

Here may the loser find his worth,
The stranger find a friend;
Here may the hopeless find their faith
And aimless find an end.

Build, from your human fabric, signs
Of how your kingdom thrives,
Of how the Holy Spirit changes life
Through changing lives.

So, to the Lord whose care enfolds
The world held in His hands,
Be glory, honour, power and praise
For which this house now stands.

John L Bell and Graham Maule

Prayer

Welcoming God,
we come to you with open hearts
and with open hands.
We come with our faith and hope,
and with our doubts and fears.
Send your Holy Spirit to work among us,
filling us and changing us
to become more like Jesus.
Amen.

Reading 1

1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. ⁶Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. ¹⁰And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, ¹¹so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD.

²² Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven. ²³He said, 'O LORD, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, ²⁴the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. ²⁵Therefore, O LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant my father David that which you promised him, saying, "There shall never fail you a successor before me to sit on the throne of Israel, if only your children look to their way, to walk before me as you have walked before me." ²⁶Therefore, O God of Israel, let your word be confirmed, which you promised to your servant my father David.

²⁷ 'But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! ²⁸Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O LORD my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; ²⁹that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. ³⁰Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive.

⁴¹ 'Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name ⁴²—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, ⁴³then hear in heaven your dwelling-place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.

Silent reflection

Solomon built a house for God.

It was beautiful.

It was constructed of the most valuable materials he could find.

The Ark of the Covenant was put in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherubim.

In a few moments of quiet, think about the churches you have known in your life, the places where you have worshipped.

What did they look like?

What did they say about God?

Reading 2

John 6: 56-69

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Prayer of confession

When we turn away from you, O God,
and go our own way:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

When the way ahead is not clear,
when everything feels too much
and we turn our backs on you:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

When we make wrong decisions
and our actions hurt others:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

When we want to give up because it's too hard:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

When we cannot see beyond ourselves and act selfishly:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

When we do not put you and others first:
forgive us, **and turn us back to you.**

Turn us back to you, O God.

Silence

Despite going our own way and not following you,
despite our doubts and fears of your presence,
you are there gently leading us,
reaching out your arms of healing and forgiveness.
Thank you, eternal God.
Amen.

Reflection

Last week, Changing Rooms was back on TV.
Two sets of neighbours decorate each other's houses, under the guidance of style guru Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen.
Boring beige is replaced with turquoise and pink.
And a hanging peacock chair in the middle of the living room.
I should fess up now that I didn't watch it – I just read a review in my morning paper.
It made me splutter with laughter.

Last week, the Taliban took over Kabul.
Our television screens have been crowded with images of desperate people trying to escape.
Risking their lives to board a plane – any plane.
No guarantee of a house at the end of their journey – just a hope that they will be safe.
Those women who studied, or wrote, or chose to live slightly independently.
Those men who worked for the UK or the US as interpreters or security guards.
20,000 homeless refugees over the next five years in this country alone.

On Thursday we met together here in Christchurch to remember and celebrate the life of John Chastney.
It was an occasion to break your heart – a sudden death, no chance to prepare, to say goodbye, to get used to the idea of what our church community would look like without him.
But also an occasion to celebrate a life well lived – and to look around a full church, and a full hall, and to remember what it feels like to be all together to worship, to sing hymns, to see each other in 3-D at last.

God's people gathered in God's house.

This morning I want to think about housing.

About what our houses – or our lack of houses – say about our attitude to life.

And to ask what a church is for.

Over the last 18 months, for most of the time, our worship has been on-screen.

We've been sitting at home in our pyjamas with a big cup of coffee, worshipping in a nice, relaxed way with our families.

Is that any less real – or more real – than being together in God's home?

Aren't our own houses God's home too?

Throughout this summer the lectionary has followed the story of the people of Israel as they longed for a king.

Saul, David, Solomon.

It was David who wanted to build a house fit for God to live in.

It was his son Solomon who got to do it.

If you read the previous three chapters in the book of Kings, you'll see what was involved in this building programme.

The writer goes to great lengths to describe the great dressed stones for the foundations, the carved cedar walls, the inner sanctuary and the huge statues of cherubim overlaid with pure gold.

Pure Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen.

What was going on here?

Of course it was partly about Solomon establishing his dynasty with glorious, imposing buildings.

A bit like the Normans coming over here in 1066 and building vast cathedrals in the key cities of their new realm.

And perhaps it was also about guaranteeing God's presence in Israel.

If we build God a fabulous house, then surely he will stay here.

We can control God.

Manage God.

Make sure that we always know where God is.

Make sure God doesn't drift off to support some other nation.

But the writer of 1 Kings doesn't completely buy into the royal rhetoric.

In the middle of a verbal tour around the carvings and the precious metals and the architecture, he tells us that the word of the Lord came to Solomon:

Concerning this house that you are building:

If you walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David.

I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.

You can't guarantee my presence by building me a gilded prison.
If you are committed to a right relationship with me...
If you try to live the kind of life that expresses my values...
That's when you will feel assured of my presence.

In today's passage from John's gospel, many of the disciples decide to leave Jesus.

His teaching is difficult: who can accept it?

They like the miraculous feeding of 5,000 people.

Who wouldn't?

That kind of God is very reassuring.

But Jesus tells them that the bread he is giving them – himself – his own flesh – is like the manna God gave their ancestors in the desert.

Only enough for today.

If you try to keep it and hoard it and ensure tomorrow's supply, it will go mouldy.

With God, there are no guarantees.

You just have to trust.

You just have to take the risk, and put one foot in front of the other.

No wonder many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

He is not offering them a nice cosy house where they know God is safely and attractively located.

He is inviting them on a journey where anything might happen.

Jesus recognises that human longing for security.

He knows that committing to a journey with him flies in the face of rational argument.

It is not safe.

So he says to the twelve – his closest friends: *Do you also wish to go away?*

And it's Simon Peter, the everyman disciple, who says:

Lord, to whom can we go?

You have the words of eternal life.

And Peter knows this, not because Jesus has provided a safe house where God can reliably be found.

On the contrary – foxes have holes and the birds of the air have their nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.

Jesus is always a guest, never the host.

But Peter knows that Jesus has the words of eternal life, because he has invited him into a relationship that has made him feel alive in a way he never has before.

So as we prepare to re-open these buildings at the start of September, as we prepare risk assessments and plan for our new pattern of worship, as we try to get the balance right between our freedom in God and our responsibility to keep each other safe, what do these readings teach us about what a church is for?

The temptation for us – as for Solomon – is to think that this is where God lives.

That this church, built fifty years ago to express an ecumenical commitment to creating a new community, is somehow a guarantee that we've got God taped down.

Here.

In our house.

But when Solomon comes to dedicate his temple, he knows that God cannot really be contained in a man-made building, however magnificent.

Will God indeed dwell on the earth?

Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.

When he really thinks about it, what Solomon hopes is that this will be a place where the needs of the people, and the loving faithfulness of God, will meet.

And it's not just our needs.

Yes, the people of Israel can come here to pray.

But also the foreigners.

When a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name.

The temple is for everyone.

Absolutely everyone.

God does not discriminate.

So how do we embody God's inclusive love here in Christchurch?

Last summer we talked about this at our church meeting.

We met on Zoom for three evenings to share our hopes and dreams and visions for what this church might be as we emerge from lockdown.

We've gone on talking and praying and imagining over this last year.

We've said we want this to be a place of sanctuary.

A place of healing after the trauma of the pandemic.

A place where the local community can find a welcome, a friendly face, a safe space.

We've said that we want it to be a place where our children and young people and families are disciplined in the life of faith, with great fun and deep seriousness.

We've said that we want it to be a place where worship is lively and real and energising.

Where we receive food for the journey.

What else might it be?

What else might we be?

As we move into the new Church year, we will be talking about what our sanctuary looks like. Our very own changing rooms project.

We will be creating and revising and implementing Risk Assessments for everything we do.

We will be arranging for cleaning and plumbing and safe electrics.

We will be discussing when it is safe enough to take off our masks.

We will be deciding which charities to support with our donations and our energy and our time.

We will be appealing for generous giving to support the fabric of the building and the mission of the church.

But we must never lose sight of the fact that the building is not where God lives.

God lives wherever we create a living, changing, growing, risk-taking community.

Where we offer hospitality to those who need it most.

So this Autumn, we will also be talking about what it means to offer a radical welcome, in four Bible Studies.

And I hope we won't just talk about it.

I hope we will embody it.

Because this is what church is for.

A place of radical welcome, where the words of eternal life that we have heard, can be shared with those who really need to hear them.

Where the needs of the people, and the loving faithfulness of God, meet.

Amen

Music StF 156

From the breaking of the dawn

To the setting of the sun,

I will stand on every promise of Your word.

Words of power, strong to save,

That will never pass away,

I will stand on every promise of Your word.

For Your covenant is sure,

And on this I am secure,

I can stand on every promise of Your word.

When I stumble and I sin,

Condemnation pressing in,

I will stand on every promise of Your word.

You are faithful to forgive,

That in freedom I might live,

So I stand on every promise of Your word.

Guilt to innocence restored:

You remember sins no more!
So I'll stand on every promise of Your word.

When I'm faced with anguished choice,
I will listen for Your voice,
And I'll stand on every promise of Your word.
Through this dark and troubled land
You will guide me with your hand
As I stand on every promise of Your word.
And you've promised to complete
Every work begun in me,
So I'll stand on every promise of Your word.

Hope that lifts me from despair,
Love that casts out every fear,
As I stand on every promise of Your word.
Not forsaken, not alone,
For the Comforter has come,
And I stand on every promise of Your word.
Grace sufficient, grace for me,
Grace for all who will believe,
We will stand on every promise of Your word.

Keith Getty & Stuart Townend

Prayers for others

Sing praises to the Lord

Whose love endures for ever

Jesus, Holy One, you are the word of eternal life.
Strengthen and encourage your church in declaring your love...
And in living your love...
Keep us faithful, even when declaring and living love is difficult...

Sing praises to the Lord

Whose love endures for ever

Jesus, Holy One, surround with your Holy presence all who defend the vulnerable and powerless.
Give courage to leaders to make wise decisions for the good of all people...
Sustain the integrity of those under pressure where conflict or selfishness would triumph...
In particular today we remember Afghanistan, its leaders, its fighters, its people, its refugees...

Sing praises to the Lord

Whose love endures for ever

Jesus, Holy One, you knew the companionship of friends and the pain of people turning away.
Be with the lonely and those who have been abandoned...
May we be secure in your love and affirmation...
May we know that we are enough....

Sing praises to the Lord
Whose love endures for ever

Jesus, Holy One, speak your words of peace to any whose minds are troubled.
Bless us all, whatever our distress...
Open your ears to our cry.

Sing praises to the Lord
Whose love endures for ever

Jesus, Holy One, be near to the broken-hearted.
Raise up those who have died...
Especially this week we remember and give thanks for the life of our brother John Chastney, and pray for
Sue, Catherine, Martin and David in their grief.
Grant that we may dwell in your house for ever.

Sing praises to the Lord
Whose love endures for ever

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 Jesus Christ,
to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life,
and we have come to believe and know
that you are the Holy One of God.
Go with us into your world.
Amen.

Music StF 397

The Spirit lives to set us free,
Walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
Walk, walk in the light.
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.

Jesus promised life to all,
Walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by his call,
Walk, walk in the light.
Walk in the light...

He died in pain on Calvary,
Walk, walk in the light.
To save the lost like you and me,
Walk, walk in the light.
Walk in the light...

We know his death was not the end,
Walk, walk in the light.
He gave his Spirit to be our friend,
Walk, walk in the light.
Walk in the light...

The Spirit lives in you and me,
Walk, walk in the light;
His light will shine for all to see,
Walk, walk in the light.
Walk in the light...

Damian Lundy

*Prayers are taken from Roots for Churches 22.8.21
and Intercessions for years A, B and C by Ian Black
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