

Christchurch Service.

8th August 2021

Order of Service.

- Call to Worship
- Welcome and Introductions
- Hymn – StF 36 ‘There’s a quiet understanding’
- Opening Prayers
- NT Reading – John 6:35, 45-51
- Reflection
- Hymn – StF 343 ‘All my days I will sing...’
- OT Reading – 1 Kings 19:4-8
- Reflection
- Hymn – StF 633 ‘My soul finds rest in God alone’
- Prayers for Others
- The Lord’s Prayer
- Blessing.
- Hymn – StF 638 ‘Through all the changing scenes of life’

Call to Worship

God calls us together as church, as community, as ourselves.

God calls us to show his world what he is like.

We worship him, and seek to imitate him in all we do.

For his glory.

So, as we meet together,

we pause to think what our God means to us.

We pray that today we will grow more like him.

We love you, Lord God,

and we want to share that love with others.

Lead us to live a life of love.

Amen.

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to this live-streamed worship from Christchurch, whether you are watching it now or later, watching on DVD or reading the transcript at home. Jesus knows where you are and is with you in your worship.

My name is Helen Dearn and I am a Local Preacher in the North Herts Methodist Circuit as well as a member here at Christchurch. Today Alex is bringing us our Bible Readings, Mike our music and Steve is managing the technical details behind the scenes. Thank you all.

So let us join together in our first hymn as we gather together in worship – ‘There’s a quiet understanding, when we’re gathered in the Spirit’.

Hymn – StF 36 ‘There’s a quiet understanding’

Opening Prayers

Loving Lord,
We come before you today,
Bringing with us all the baggage of the past week
The joys and successes, the struggles and challenges
And we lay them at your feet
For we know that you are the source of all we need
And that you are holding out your hand to us
Ready to celebrate or cry with us
Ready to help, ready to provide what we need
And ready to hold us in your arms
To share that love and understanding
That sees us become one with you.
Lord, we stand in your presence and offer you
Our loving praise and adoration.

Yet, Lord, we also need to come before you to say sorry
For the times we have gone our own way
And have not listened to your prompting in our souls.
Our own determination to know what is best, or right
So often has led us astray and we have hurt
You, hurt others and hurt ourselves in the process
By the things we have done and said, or not done and said.
Forgive us, Loving Lord
And renew our souls to be worthy of you once more.

As so, Lord, we bring you our grateful thanks.
Thank you for loving us so much that you
Are always looking for a way to bring us back to you.
Thank you for always being ready and able to provide all that we need
And not what we want
And that what you offer is eternal life
Spend in company with you.
Thank you, Loving Lord,
And so accept our grateful and humble thanks and praise.
Amen.

And now Alex is going to bring us our NT reading from John’s Gospel.

NT Reading – John 6: 35, 45-51

Reflection

In the narrative of John's Gospel, this teaching of Jesus comes after the feeding of the five thousand. This miracle is recorded in all four Gospels, which is rare, and shows Jesus providing sustenance for the hungry crowds who are following him round to witness his preaching, teaching and healing. However, Jesus knows that many are there just for the spectacle, or for what they can get in the here and now. This is made clear in a comment that comes just before the passage Alex read for us. Despite all that they have seen and experienced, the crowds haven't yet understood Jesus' message. In asking what they need to do to perform God's works, Jesus tells them to believe in the one whom God has sent amongst them. Their reply? "Show us a miraculous sign if you want to believe in you. What can you do? After all, our ancestors ate manna while they journeyed through the wilderness! The Scriptures say, 'Moses gave them bread from heaven to eat'.

Jesus responds not by defending himself and saying "Look at everything I've already done, isn't that evidence enough for you?", but by challenging the statement that it was Moses who gave the Israelites bread in the wilderness and reminding them that this was in fact a gift from God. He then goes on to claim that in him they find the true bread of God and that in him they and we can find the one who gives life to the world. It's also important to note that manna was there to fulfil their physical needs on a day-by-day basis. Indeed, apart from the Sabbath, and extra manna collected that was in excess of what was needed soon became maggoty and mouldy.

Now, there is something important about learning to live day-by-day and trusting in Jesus to provide what we need. I'm sure we all can recognise the Bible passages about the lilies of the fields or the birds in the air not worrying about tomorrow. But this statement of Jesus is not talking about the provision of physical nourishment – he's already demonstrated that in the feeding of the five thousand. Rather, he is talking about something much more precious – life eternal.

And that requires us to not just listen throughout this life that we have been given, but to learn as well. God has plans for our lives and he will start with us right where we are in the here and now. He doesn't want us perfect and fully accomplished before giving us the works he has planned for us, rather he works in and through us to enable us to journey through life to accomplish his will for us. And, as Jesus stresses here, we are taught by God through the Bible, through our experiences, through the thoughts of the Holy Spirit, through relationships with other Christians and through the way we connect and care for those we come into contact with.

Jesus told us that the greatest commandments were to love God with all our being and then love each other as we love ourselves. Here he is telling us that when we love God so completely, we receive not just nourishment for our physical body, but for our mind, our spirit and our soul. And that nourishment is something we can pass on to others. We are called to be Jesus' workers in the field of life and we are called to care for each other and as such will be satisfied, fulfilled, nourished by the one who gives life to this world.

Hymn – ‘All my days I will sing...’

OT Reading – 1 Kings 19:4-8.

Reflection

I have some photos of famous people to show you (PowerPoint Slide). They are: Naomi Osaka, Ben Stokes, Adam Peaty and Simone Biles. These are all sports people who are amongst the very, very best in their chosen field, yet who have all spoken publicly about taking a break to focus on their mental health. Whilst this has won huge support from many people around the world for their honesty and their willingness to say that it's OK to not be OK, and that it's OK to talk about it too, they have also been subjected to a huge amount of criticism and even personal abuse; often by people who have no idea at all what it takes to be an elite athlete. And, yes, I chose athletes, but could easily have chosen musicians, actors, surgeons, nurses, teachers...in fact, anyone who has found that they need to take time out to look after their mental well-being. It's just that these people are currently in the news.

And, I think one of the reasons that their actions have caught the public's attention is that we've also been sold the idea through the Media that they have it all - success, fame, money. There seems to me to be an underlying question of 'what have they got to worry about' and an assumption that they should just pull themselves together and get on with it. Yet, if you have even known anyone who struggles with their mental health (and I have close friends and family who do) then I hope that you know that this is the worst thing you can say to them. Such comments simply add to the guilt, shame, depression and anxiety they are already feeling and simply pushes people deeper into the pit.

In this Scripture reading we have just heard from 1 Kings; Elijah is struggling with a deep depression and is expressing suicidal thoughts. Yet, if you read his story up to this point, he has been experiencing huge success. He has seen God's power working in him and through him, prophesying a drought whilst being fed by ravens so he stayed alive, providing the widow of Zarephath with ever-full pots of flour and oil and restoring her son back to life, and then defeating the prophets of Baal in the contest on Mount Carmel. Surely life was good for Elijah? He knew and had experienced God's power and provision, yet here he is – afraid, depressed and ready to die because Jezebel was after him and determined to have him killed.

Interestingly, there's a degree of the illogical here, isn't there? Elijah is asking God to take his life so that Jezebel cannot have him killed. Elijah is unable to think straight and so can only focus on the threat and fear he is feeling, rather on the possible ways to find a way out of the situation. Elijah here is certainly not able to just pick himself up and pull himself together. He needs help.

And, help arrives through the actions of an angel. And, it is the actions of the angel that I want to focus on. Firstly, the angel looks after Elijah's physical needs. I'm sure we all know that when we are exhausted, hungry or thirsty, our tolerance levels are so much lower. I certainly know that when I am tired, I am much more snappy, much more

inclined to see the world as working against me and so much more likely to shut down and turn my back on everyone for a while. Getting some rest, making sure I've eaten something and knowing I have had enough to drink certainly helps me get back to a point where I can deal with the issues I am struggling with. But sometimes it needs someone else to sort all that out first. The angel doesn't wake Elijah up and say "You need to find something to eat and drink, prepare it and cook it". No, Elijah is woken to bread that is freshly baked and a jug of water, not just once but twice. Which is also telling, I think. One intervention is rarely enough for someone struggling with mental health issues. It takes time and it takes perseverance, which is hard for all concerned.

And I do think that is a message that we need to hear very much today. Thankfully, there is so much more that is spoken about mental health, but it is also clear that the stigma attached to having struggles with one's mental health are still deeply ingrained in society. And one of the things that frustrate me is the expectation that the person who is struggling is the one who has to sort it out. Let me try and explain what I am trying to say. A couple of years when I was struggling with a work situation, I was taken aside during a night duty shift to be told that "people were concerned about me" (but not which people or what the concerns were) and asked if I felt I needed help? I was then given a website address and a telephone contact number so I could get the support this person felt I needed.

Despite the shock of the interaction and the way it had been carried out, I did feel able to say that there was no point giving me a number to call because that was simply not going to happen. I have always struggled with using the phone (I was at least 16 before my Mum realised that I would get her to make an appointment at the hairdresser's) so the thought of calling a stranger to talk about issues that I didn't fully understand anyway was simply a non-starter. The response was to use the website instead (as if that was any better!). Clearly, this manager felt that she had ticked her boxes and provided me with information about support. Now it was up to me to sort myself out and my saying that I couldn't do that was now my problem. Thankfully, my solution was to change jobs and get out of what was proving to be a toxic environment. However, I do wonder if the situation could have been different had the manager suggested I take a few days off, had made a face-to-face appointment with someone, or even offered me a cup of tea when she saw that I was shaken and upset? The angel looked after Elijah and provided what he needed there and then before sending on his way.

And that's the second thing I want to focus on. The angel didn't just send Elijah off into the unknown, he sent him to God. Elijah had to make the journey, but through the care of the angel he was supported in reaching the cave on Mount Horeb and hearing God's voice in the sound of a gentle whisper. The angel had attended to Elijah's physical needs and then had directed him to the one place where he would receive all he needed for his mental, emotional and spiritual needs. Is that not our call too? To reach out with practical help, but also to share with others the love, compassion and care that can be found in Jesus Christ? To bring people into the presence of the Bread of Life, the one who provides eternal nourishment not just for our bodies, but for our minds, our spirits and our souls as well?

But please do not think I believe this is a quick fix and that anyone who believes in Jesus should not struggle with their mental health. I am sure Elijah still had his struggles and his moments of doubt, fear and depression. Each and everyone of us has good times and bad times and whilst many of us can pick ourselves up in most circumstances, we all also need good friends and supporters who will see the struggle and step in to help – gently, practically and repeatedly. So, yes, it's OK to not be OK and it's OK to talk about it. And, the more we do the more we will tackle the stigma that persists around mental health issues and the more people will feel able to access support where it is available. But as Christians we also need to be that source of support and help, of guidance and direction so that we too can be like the angel who brought Elijah back from the brink and helped him into the presence of God, the source of hope, of life and of eternal love.

Amen.

Hymn – StF 633 'My soul finds rest in God alone'

Prayers for Others

PowerPoint Slide for Responses

Lord God, there are so many people who need
the difference in their lives that only you can bring.

Lord, sometimes we feel so useless
when faced with all the needs of our world.

We forget the important part we play just by opening our lives to you,
praying to you, and being your hands and feet.

We pray today for our families, our friends, our peers, our teachers.

**Help us to share
through our prayer
and through our care.**

We pray for everyone who has helped us grow closer to you;
for our church family, and our ministers.

Help us to share...

We pray for our community, the world in which we live and work and have our being.

Help us to share...

We pray for people who feel they have nothing to share, nothing even to live for; the
homeless, prisoners, people at the end of relationships, the sick and those who
mourn.

**Help us to share
through our prayer
and through our care.
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,
Gives us today our daily bread
And 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 forever,
Amen,

Blessing.

As your dearly loved children,
we have presented ourselves before you.
Now we go out to follow your example, Lord,
to live our lives according to your will,
and to spread your wonderful love.
Go with us, Lord.
Amen.

Hymn – StF ‘Through all the changing scenes of life’