

Trinity United Reformed Church Wimbledon



Sunday 22 November 2020 Order of Service for Worship At Home

Led by the Revd Bruce Stuart
(retired URC minister)

Gathering in God's presence

Call to worship

God is here! God is now!

Because this is Sunday, as with all Sundays,
this is a day to celebrate Christ's resurrection.

In this bizarre time of 'lockdown' we are all discovering ways to stay connected
and to stay faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ.

We would prefer not just to be together but to be able heartily to sing together.

Nonetheless we are discovering that God's Holy Spirit is able to ignite --

in our separate households,
and above all in our hearts and minds --
his love and his grace.

Through our worship, though separate yet united in the Holy Spirit
may we celebrate Christ's presence in the world.

Hymn – Almighty Father of all things that be

Almighty Father of all things that be,
our life, our work we consecrate to thee,
whose heavens declare thy glory from above,
whose earth below is witness to thy love.

For well we know this weary, fallen earth
is yet thine own by right of its new birth,
since that great cross upreared on Calvary
redeemed it from its fault and shame to thee.

Thine still the changeful beauty of the hills,
the purple valleys flecked with silver rills,
the ocean glistening 'neath the golden rays:
they all are thine, and voiceless speak thy praise.

Thou dost the strength to worker's arms impart;
from thee the skilled musician's mystic art,
the grace of poet's pen or painter's hand,
to teach the loveliness of sea and land.

Then grant us, Lord, in all things thee to own,
to dwell within the shadow of thy throne,
to speak and work, to think and live and move
reflecting thine own nature, which is love;

that so, by Christ redeemed from sin and shame,
and hallowed by thy Spirit's cleansing flame,
ourselves, our work, and all our powers may be
a sacrifice acceptable to thee.

Ernest Dugmore (1843-1925) altd.

Prayer of approach and confession

Loving God, you know that all of us have had challenges and frustrations over the past several months, with our lifestyles severely restricted with the intention of making our communities safe for everyone. We give thanks that it has taught us the goodness and the discipline of praising you for everyday experiences that make life tolerable, and the discipline of looking for things in our everyday life which are comforting, and some of which are astounding and wonderful, such as unexpected acts of kindness and friendliness.

Therefore, Loving God, we give you thanks that this is a day that you have made, that you are giving to us.

We thank you for the good things which surround us: our homes, our families, our friends, our church, the beauty of the natural world, and the sights and sounds of daily life.

We thank you for all the interest, and the opportunities, and the pleasure this day may bring.

Above all, we thank you for the love of Christ which encircles us, and for your Holy Spirit to guide us.

Loving God, forgive us that we have sometimes lost sight of your great love, that we have been forgetful of you, greeting some days with weariness which only expects minor variations on the not very interesting pattern and experience of so many of our days before this one.

As we have been required to make smaller the circle in which we have been living, forgive us, Lord, for narrowing our vision. We are, after all, still, all of us, in the same, wide world with its conflicts and sadness, and as well as new opportunities and developments that can be made use of for good purposes.

Almighty and most-wonderful God, remind us that you always have more to reveal; you always have more to say to us and share with us. Spiritually open our eyes and our minds and our hearts so that we may be servants of our Lord Jesus Christ... who taught us, when we pray together to say.....

Use either of these forms, or a different version/language if you prefer:

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 forever. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed
be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done; on
earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive
those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

I am grateful for this invitation to conduct this act of worship.

For those of you who do not know me, I am a retired United Reformed Church minister. For just under forty years my ministries were in URC's in and around London – my last ministry having been in nearby New Malden.

For those of you who have been trying to figure out my accent I'll tell you that I was brought up in the United States. Given my very Scottish name you will not be surprised to learn I was brought up as a Presbyterian.

My wife, Chris, is from Wales, and we met while studying at a theological college in Princeton, New Jersey, where the university is.

Having got married we had the difficult choice of which side of the Atlantic to live on, realising it would mean being a long way from either my family or hers.

By that time I had already become an Anglophile so, in the end it was not hard to choose living here.

Listening to God's Word

Bible Reading: Ephesians 1: 15-23

Paul's prayer

¹⁵ I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶ I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, ¹⁸ so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. ²⁰ God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. ²² And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Hymn - As the bride is to her chosen

As the bride is to her chosen,
as the monarch to the realm,
as the keep unto the castle,
as the pilot to the helm,
so, Lord, art thou to me.

As the fountain in the garden,
as the candle in the dark,
as the treasure in the coffer,
as the manna in the ark,
so, Lord, art thou to me.

As the music at the banquet,
as the stamp unto the seal,
as the medicine to the fainting,
as the wine-cup at the meal,
so Lord, art thou to me.

As the ruby in the setting,
as the honey in the comb,
as the light within the lantern,
as the parent in the home,
so, Lord, art thou to me.

As the sunshine in the heavens,
as the image in the glass,
as the fruit unto the fig-tree,
as the dew until the grass,
so Lord, art thou to me.

Para. From John Tauler (c.1300-61) by Emma Bevan (1827-1909)

Bible Reading: Matthew 25: 31-40

The judgement of the Nations

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' ⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

Sermon

Texts: Ephesians 1.15 – 23 & Matthew 25.31 – 40.

There is a paradox in the writings of the New Testament in the ways power is spoken of, concerning Jesus.

Jesus died in weakness, upon the cross. The cross is the central image of the church. Crucified in weakness, but raised in glory.

The resurrection is spoken about as an event by which, with great power, and mystery, God raised His Son to life, but when Jesus appeared to his followers he had on him the marks of the nails by which he had been impaled on the cross, to die, with great suffering, to die in weakness.

That is, of course a source of great consolation to any of us in our own times of weakness. We know that as our Saviour he is able to enter with sympathy and with gentleness into our lives, and to be with us, when we feel isolated, when we are trapped in a situation which is causing us anguish and discouragement. Through his weakness and vulnerability he comes into our weakness and vulnerability.

Indeed such times of communion in prayer with our crucified Saviour can become a turning point for us, leading us to feel, well, empowered by his great compassion for us.

Jesus, who became weak on our behalf....

On the other hand there are times when Jesus is spoken of as someone with great power.

It's difficult for us to understand such language. It is 'theological' and 'mythical'.

Listen to an example from the familiar, wonderful chapter 15 about resurrection in Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*. In verses 20 to 28 Paul sets out a sequence of events when Christ will be triumphant. These are verses 24 and 25:

Then comes the end, when he – Jesus – hands the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.

'Theologically', 'mythologically' this will happen after Jesus' resurrection when God the Father has conferred all authority and power on Christ.

Unmistakably that is the language about a warrior, a warrior who kills opposing rulers, a warrior who puts his foot down on the neck of a vanquished opponent.

You see what I mean about a paradox in the writings of the New Testament concerning Jesus and power?

An image of power is in the reading this morning from *The Letter to the Ephesians* from chapter 1:

God put... power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead.....

The next phrase itself provides an image of power and authority. Verses 20 and 21 continue:

.....raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion...

And then verse 22:

[God] has put all things under his feet.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, our Gospel reading for today, Jesus begins with an image of power and authority, and, moreover, sparing all modesty, seems rather unmistakably to be referring to himself. This is the opening phrase in the parable:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory.

You may remember that Mark, chapter 13 is a chapter full of apocalyptic imagery. Jesus uses that same imagery which is at the beginning of the parable of the sheep and the goats. In Mark, chapter his followers 13 Jesus says thatand here I am quoting:

.....they will see 'the Son of Man' coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels and gather the elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (vv.26, 27).

When we read about those angels we should not be imagining them as cute, fluffy, reassuring figures. They are an army!

That's what the shepherds abiding with their flocks by night near to Bethlehem see when they see all 'the heavenly host'. It's an army.

The image from our reading today from *Ephesians* is of a throne room. To repeat some of those words again: *God..... seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places (v.20).*

Let's imagine that the throne room is also full of angels, angels charged with power and authority to carry out the commands of God, and of His Son.

Archangel Michael? Archangel Gabriel? These are the chiefs of the spiritual forces and the Cabinet ministers.

The parable of the sheep and the goats is telling us that God's power is focused on those who are vulnerable:

the hungry and thirsty, the stranger,

those who are naked and those who are unwell,

those who were in prison.

In Matthew, chapter 18 Jesus speaks to his disciples about children. He begins by saying that anyone who wishes to enter God's kingdom he or she must become humble like a child – 'humble', meaning chiefly, 'vulnerable'. Later in that chapter, however, he says that children should be honoured and protected. Here's verse 10:

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you, their angels continually see the face of my father in heaven.

In other words, the job description for these all-powerful angels is to be ready to protect those who are most vulnerable on earth.

Percy Dearmer is best known as the hymn writer, and writer of the words, of the hymn, *Jesus, good above all other/ gentle child of gentle mother*. Now, I realise that to the musically sensitive among you I may have just activated an 'ear worm' and you'll now have the tune of that hymn distract you from what I'm saying for the next few minutes.

So: 'fight fire with fire'. Remember the tune, named 'Slane' which we sing to *Be thou my vision, O Lord of my Heart*, and imagine it used to another of Percy Dearmer's hymns – long since forgotten. Here are its first two verses, and they express this image of powerful angels charged with the oversight of those who are most vulnerable:

*Angels and ministers, spirits of grace,
Friends of the children, beholding God's face,
Moving like thought to us through the beyond
Moulded in beauty, and free from our bond!*

*Messengers clad in the swiftness of light,
Subtle as flame, as creative in might,
Helmed with the truth and with charity shod,
Wielding the wind of the purpose of God.*

This would be the cue for me to express some inoffensive, emollient words that as Christians we ought to remember the poor and the vulnerable among us.

No! It is not about being laudable for us to try to do – well, I don't know -- something or other if and when it occurs to us for those who are vulnerable.

This parable tells us who are the most important people. Just as their angels in heaven have them as their principal responsibility, so in our turn we ought to see them as our top priority, too.

After all, in the Lord's Prayer we pray:

Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

If we prioritised matters *on earth as it is in heaven* – God on his throne, Jesus as 'the Son of Man' seated at his right hand, and a host of angels charged with exercising God's authority -- then the focus for earthy authorities would be on those mentioned in Jesus' parable:

the hungry and thirsty. the stranger, the naked, those who are unwell, and those in prison.

Speaking of those who are unwell, throughout this dreadful ordeal of Covid-19 which we – along with everyone else in the world – are in the midst of, there has been a tussle between prioritising care for those who are unwell and protecting jobs.

Everyone knows it is a false contrast, but there have been difficult decisions as to how to allocate financial support.

Speaking of people with great earthly influence, as this terrible crisis was first breaking in on us in the first months of this year, some leaders were focusing mainly on keeping the

economy moving. This was before the economies of so many countries received a series of body blows.

By contrast, right back in early April the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva set this as her first recommended priority:

To continue with essential containment measures and support for health systems.

She went on with these words:

Some say there is a trade-off between saving lives and saving livelihoods. I say this is a false dilemma.

Given this is a pandemic crisis defeating the virus and defending people's health are necessary for economic recovery (Speech, 'Confronting the Crisis: Priorities for the Global Economy', April 9, 2020).

As we imagine God's angels are focused on those who are the most vulnerable on earth so we need to remember that people literally throughout the world are afflicted by Covid-19.

So: now that we have grounds for hope not just in one vaccine but possibly a few vaccines, who should get them?

'Vaccine nationalism' is a phrase that refers to wealthy countries buying up a disproportionate amount of the vaccines.

On 29 October *The Daily Telegraph* reported on research by a not-for-profit organisation, Rand Europe.

They argue that allowing 'vaccine nationalism' to govern the distribution of vaccines, the worldwide death toll will be twice as high as it might otherwise be.

I do not know whether I am about to say is only a quote from *The Daily Telegraph* article or from the Rand Europe report, but here it is:

Failure to immunise the most vulnerable populations everywhere would prolong the pandemic, risking lives and further crippling big-money making industries such as tourism, retail and transportation.

(One further sentence based on the Rand Europe report:)

However, if these high-income countries invested in efforts to ensure under-resourced countries also had equal access to the first round of vaccines, the return in investment would be four-fold: for every US dollar spent, high-income countries would get back about \$4.80.

Those who are thirsty, those who are hungry, the strangers,
as well as those in need of clothing and shelter,
those who are unwell –

those are the ones we need to keep in focus. To exercise the discipline to keep them in our focus, is something we need to learn and relearn, from the heart.

Responding to God's grace

Prayer of Intercession

We come now before God with our prayers for others.
Let us pray

As the days get darker and colder, we pray for people who find themselves in the dark places of the world.

Those in warzones where nights bring no respite from bombings or attacks.
Those making the perilous trips to escape unsafe countries by land, air, or sea.
Those in areas where streets aren't safe to walk because of gang violence.
Those working in sweatshops or other exploitative workplaces where long days and low pay are common.
Those who are overworked or who are unemployed.
Those in abusive or violent households where the darkness hides bruises and words of torment are whispered.
Those living with the black cloud of poor mental health, especially where lockdown has made them more isolated.
Those who are ill or awaiting test results, where nights bring no respite from symptoms or anxiety.
Those grieving a lost loved one, where the nights are long and empty.
Those known to us and those only to you, who we hold before you in a few moments of silence:

We pray for those who can bring hope and light into these areas.

Those who work towards peace at all levels of society.

Those who govern internationally, nationally, and locally.

Those who support refugees and asylum seekers.

Those who police streets and encourage dialogue between perpetrators and victims.

Those who are in management in businesses and workplaces.

Those supporting people who are job seekers.

Those who support domestic violence sufferers and work with their abusers.

Those who work in counselling or psychotherapy roles.

Those who treat the sick, carers (both paid and unpaid) and undertake research into so many diseases and conditions.

Those who work in funeral homes, officiate at funerals, and those in charities supporting the bereaved.

Finally, Lord we pray for ourselves. May you give us the light we need in our lives and direct our focus to where we can bring light to others, even for a short time.

We bring all these prayers before you, Father God, along with the unspoken prayers of our hearts.

Amen

Offertory

This is an opportunity to set aside your regular financial contribution to Trinity's ongoing work and witness. You might like to put it in a jar for now, ready to be brought in person when circumstances allow. Then say the prayer below (if you already participate in Trinity's Planned Giving scheme via direct bank transfer, then simply recite the prayer – no need for a jar!)

Living God, accept these our gifts.
As you have spoken your creative and renewing word to us,
 through the Bible,
 and in the living presence of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
continue to speak to us to guide us in the way we use these gifts and live our lives
 with power to change and renew your world.
We ask this in Jesus' name.
Amen.

*Before our final hymn, may I say to 'my fellow Americans', in anticipation of Thursday,
Happy Thanksgiving Day.*

Hymn – Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim

Ye servants of God,
your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad
his wonderful name;
the name all-victorious
of Jesus extol;
his kingdom is glorious;
and rules over all.

God ruleth on high,
almighty to save;
and still he is nigh,
his presence we have;
the great congregation
his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation
to Jesus our King.

Salvation to God
who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud,
and honour the Son;
the praises of Jesus
the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces,
and worship the Lamb.

Then let us adore,
and give him his right,
all glory and power,
all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing,
with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing
and infinite love.

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

Closing Prayer & Blessing

Let us pray.

Loving God, enable us by your grace to walk trustfully as your children, giving glory to our Lord Jesus Christ and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the blessing of Almighty God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
be upon you this day
and forevermore.
Amen.

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