



Worship 16 August

Welcome

Welcome to worship on this Sunday in the middle of the month of August. This means that we are looking forward to September when we hope to be able to gather again in the three churches in our pastorate, Weoley Hill Church, Weoley Castle Community Church and Bournville URC. But it will not be as we were used to before lockdown. For instance, as part of the safety measures we have to take we may not be able to sing in church for a while which many of us will greatly miss. That is a temporary measure as, no doubt, there will come a time we can sing again. But there are also habits and customs in our worship and church life that we may want to reconsider and not return to. We should not just want to return to the “normal” of the past but be adventurous and creative as we look to the future. “I am doing a new thing...do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43: 19) The two Bible readings of today will encourage us to be bold as we cross over to the “new,” even when we have no clear idea yet what this “new” may be.

Hymn

Be thou my vision

Prayer

O God, our wisdom and our strength, we thank you that you have brought us to this day for a time of reflection and rest. Calm our minds, refresh us with your peace. In Christ draw us close to one another, even when we are not physically together, in the bonds of his love. We pray in the power of the Spirit. Amen.

Reading

Joshua 3: 1-6

Mark 4: 35-41

Reflection

The Message version of Joshua 3:4 reads: “Make sure you keep a proper distance between you and it [the ark of the covenant], about half a mile—be sure now to keep your distance! —and you’ll see clearly the route to take. You’ve never been on this road before..... ‘When you come to the edge of the Jordan’s waters, stand there on the riverbank.’”

The people of Israel have journeyed 40 years in the desert, a nation-altering and nation-making journey that started with the Exodus and crossing of the Red Sea and will end with the crossing of the river Jordan. And here they stand, on the riverbank, and they are told to keep a distance from the ark of the covenant which will be carried before them and will show them the way over the river.

This image of keeping distance speaks to us in our current situation. The idea is that the ark of the covenant will provide safety, will clear the way and show the way on the unfamiliar terrain that the people are travelling on. And so does the “distancing” we have been forced into by the corona crisis. Not only physical distancing (to keep us safe) but also the distancing from what has been so familiar to us. Having had to step back, keeping a distance has given us space to consider who we are, whose we are and what is really important in our lives – our personal lives, our community life - and in our churches and ministry.

And then the other image of the people standing on the edge also speaks to us. Of course, as we already stand at the edge we may want to “cross over” to the other side as soon as possible. Yet, standing a while “on the edge” is important too. It gives us the opportunity to consider those on the edges or margins of society, or the “edgy” issues that we would rather pass by. It

provides us the valuable experience of being on the edge and having to be bold, stepping out in faith with the possibility that we may either land on solid ground or taught to fly (or rather swim when standing at the edge of a river). Yes, standing on the edge is the beginning of the adventure of stepping out into the “new.”

And consider the crossing in both Scripture readings as well. In the Joshua reading there is a symbolic and real act of moving from a past of slavery and grief, loss and trauma to a new beginning and faith in God who liberates, accompanies and provides. It challenges us to pay attention to momentous occasions (such as the corona crisis we are living through) as an offering of new opportunities and a fresh beginning. And also the water is not insignificant. What will this “new” look like? What shape(s) will it embody? We do not know yet; we have to pass through the waters first.

“Let us go across to the other side...” Jesus says. That is the ever-constant invitation, to cross-over to the other side of all that chains and locks us down. Left to our own devices, we would rather stay where we are, stick to what we know, remain in our comfort zones or our default mode. Maybe that is why Jesus doesn’t give the disciples any time to think about the trip. “On that day...he said to them” No lengthy thinking about it or planning. (Isn’t “thinking about it” one of our best excuses not to act, not to change, not to be adventurous?)

And then there is the storm, which is not the adventure; it is the risk or cost of stepping out, crossing over. It is also throwing ourselves into the arms of grace to be carried to the other side.

The promise of this text is both that Jesus is with us (“Let US go over to the other side”) and that there is something on the other side that Jesus knows about and wants or needs us to get

to. Of course, the reality for the disciples, and for us, is that the other side takes us to the not yet treaded upon with its own set of challenges. It means, with the disciples, having to see Jesus differently, themselves differently. It means moving and living into a new reality. And that takes some getting used to. And getting to the other side is no easy trip. Crossing over to the other side may mean a boat ride, a torrential downpour, and dead calm. That is what happens when Jesus tries to move us from one place to another. But that is also the nature of change. It is the adventure of discipleship.

In the gospel reading the act of faith is not just to trust that Jesus will still the storm. The act of faith is taking Jesus' invitation to heart. The act of faith is getting into the boat. The act of faith is believing that there is another side that we are led to and faithfully crossing over to the "new" – travelling from the old to the new, a journey we do not take alone. Thanks be to God!

Hymn

One more step along the world I go

Prayer

God of our past, present and our future, we thank you for all that has gone before in which we have known your gracious and loving presence in our lives and in the world. As we know your inspiration and encouragement in the present we look to the future and we wonder what it will bring. Fill us with a vision for what could be; give us hope that as we dare to "cross over" to the new we will discover the fullness of life that you wish for all of us. Holy God, ever present with us, we pray for all who are anxious, not only about what the future may hold but also about the present. We pray for those who are ill, who are lonely, those who are mourning the death of loved ones.

May you comfort them and give them peace of mind while we reach out to them with love and care. We also pray at this time for the young people who are anxious about their end of year grades and exam results, that these grades may truly reflect their work and abilities. We pray for the victims of the blast in Beirut as well as all people in Lebanon as they seek to recover from the disaster and a failing economy. And we continue to lift up to you all the victims of the corona crisis all over the world as well as the health workers who are weary and tired but continue to care for their patients. And we pray for each other and everyone on our hearts and minds today.....We pray together.....OUR FATHER

Blessing

O God, send your grace to go with us, your peace to keep us and your love to surround us as we journey from the old to the new...Amen.

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