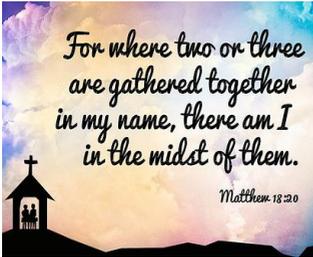


Worship 6th September 2020



Welcome Today some of us meet in the church building, and some of us are still at home. But together we are the church, united as the body of Christ and as the Psalm 133 proclaims: *O how wonderful, how joyous it is, when we dwell together in peace and unity.....It is like the freshness of the morning. It is like the comfort of the nightfall. Here the Holy blesses, now and*

forever. (Psalm 133 Redux by Carla Grosch-Miller)

Hymn Praise to the Lord, the Almighty

Prayer

Gracious and loving God, we gather this morning together in church/each in our own homes to worship you. We come to add our voices to the chorus of praise raised to you all around us, in all of creation. We come as we are, distracted and weary, hopeful and open, knowing that you accept us and are ever mindful of our cares and joys. Still in us now the many voices that clamour for our attention, that we might center ourselves upon you. Speak to us, Spirit of Life, in word and melody.....that we may be renewed in faith and strengthened for your service. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Scripture Readings Isaiah 43: 1 & 5-10 & Matthew 18: 15-20

Reflection

On this day that we re-open the church for worship, after we had to close it for many months, let me ask a question: What does church mean to you? And how would you describe the church? When we look through the Bible and through history, there are many definitions of church. There is the gathering of believers, the church in a particular locality, the church universal which means all followers of Jesus everywhere, and the historical church stretching

all the way back in time to the very first believers. There are house churches and cathedrals and all sizes in between.....So what, exactly, is church?

Perhaps it is good to remind ourselves what church is not. It is not a building (or not primarily). It is the people who are the church. And so we have continued to be the church even when not able to meet in our church buildings. Because the church is made up of people, it also is not a place free of conflict, as we read in our gospel reading. We bring different opinions and experiences to our gathering....our unique and complex personalities that can cause tension and disagreement. If we expect the church (the people) never to disappoint us, then we surely will be disappointed.

Church is also never a retreat from the world. We may come to church to feel spiritually refreshed and strengthened for the week ahead, but if church encourages us to ignore what is going on around us, we are missing the point. Just look at all the prophets in the Bible who have to remind the religious institutions that God deeply cares about injustice and poverty. And church also is not to be a club, nor just a convenient venue or useful for social standing or admission to schools, for instance.... No, church is what Jesus said: *Where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I will be there among you.* So church is a gathering of people, even just 2 or 3, that invites God's presence. I am glad that we can meet the quorum in our three churches in the pastorate! Yes, this statement "*where two or three are gathered*" suits us well as it means that no matter how small a gathering of believers we may be, he will be there. Actually, in Jesus' day, this declaration was a radical challenge to the religious establishment. In the Judaism of the time, the quorum, called a minyan, was at least 10 and perhaps as many as 12. 10 to 12 men (!) were needed to hold a valid prayer service, or "*for the Spirit of God to descend.*" This was already revolutionary, to say that God's spirit could be present somewhere outside the temple in Jerusalem, but Jesus went even further by lowering the minimum to two – a number that meant God's spirit could be present anywhere, that church could be anywhere, as long as just two people were together. This new minyan was a signal that church was to be less about restrictions and requirements and more about relationship.

It is also a reminder that church is not something we can *do* on our own; that in fact we can only truly grow in faith and faithfulness in community. That is what the desert mothers and fathers, the hermits who made their homes in the wilderness to live and pray by themselves, found out. They tell of being reluctantly drawn back to communal life because they realized they could only get so far on their spiritual journey when no one was bothering them with questions, challenging them, inconveniencing them with needs and worries...In other words, when no one was forcing them to be human. So church is about being together in person or in spirit, such as some of us are while at home!

Another radical aspect of Jesus announcing that he will be with us whenever we are gathered together is that the minyan in his time required that the 10-12 people involved should be men, and that none of them could be sinners. Yet when Jesus said "*where two or three are gathered, I am there with you,*" he was speaking to his followers, a group that included men *and* women, as well as tax collectors, for instance, who were considered sinners collaborating with the Roman overlords. So church is anywhere we gather together in the presence of God, and especially when we are inclusive of ALL people.

What else is church?

In Isaiah's vision, God's people are called together from the east and west, the north and south, gathered in by a God who loves them and calls them by name. So church is where we are welcomed home by God, a God to whom we belong and who will never forsake us, no matter what happens to us or how the world treats us. And church is also a place where we are "called out from" (= ekklesia in Greek), to "go out" into the world, to respond to the uncertainty of world events and the desolation of human made and natural disasters through our prayers, with our resources, and through our actions. So church is where we respond to the hurts of the world and where we learn to serve others, to care for those in need, and to respond to the call to help build the kingdom of God of justice and peace. And in church we recognize the gifts and talents God has given us for the task.

What else is church? As Isaiah says, it is where we bear witness to records of God's goodness in the lives of God's people and where we share experiences of God's goodness in our lives, witnessing to God's never-ending work to bring forth life and light.

So much more can be said, such as church being a community, where we can be healed and restored, where we care for one another with joy and compassion, where we celebrate the sacraments of baptism and communion, where we come together to share in rites and rituals that help us draw deeper into the heart of God and closer to one another. It is a place we find spiritual refreshment and come face to face with the mystery of God's presence amongst us. It is where we recognize our shortcomings but also know that we are claimed as part of God's family, as followers of Jesus, accepted just as we are. It is where we learn of the wonderful love of God and are encouraged to share that love with others. Yes, that is the church...Thanks be to God!

Hymn Jesus puts this song into our hearts

Offering

We pray God's blessing upon the gifts we offer as a sign of our gratitude and commitment. Amen.

Prayers

Since the church building was closed, Bournville URC has each week collected prayers from the congregation to pray on Sunday at home. That is one of the ways we have been church together. Some of the prayers we pray today...

Gracious God, who hears our prayers, who strengthens hearts and who blesses, over and over, we lift up our prayers to you...

This week that the children and young people have gone back to school we pray for their safety and wellbeing in the school environment and on their journey to and from school. And we pray for the teachers and parents who are both happy for the children to be back in the classroom but perhaps also anxious whether all the safety measures will work.

We pray that as offices may gradually open again that the office environment will be safe to return to and no one will feel coerced to return if it is not.

With more people on the move, we pray that everyone will respect the distancing measures and continue to look out for the most vulnerable.

We pray for all who are starting new jobs, and for those who have been made redundant and have not been able to find work since.

We pray for families who are struggling financially and have had to resort to foodbanks. We are grateful for all the help that is offered through foodbanks and other support agencies and the commitment of staff and volunteers.

We pray for wisdom for and trustworthiness of government leaders across the world as they deal with a variety of challenges beside the corona pandemic, such as recession and increasing job losses, political divisions and unrest, strained international relations, racial tensions...

We pray for all who are sick and in pain, and especially those awaiting hospital appointments or a diagnosis on their health problems. And we pray for doctors, nurses and consultants as they work long hours trying to catch up on the back log resulting from Covid 19.

And we pray for those concerns that are on our hearts and in our minds....

We pray together.....OUR FATHER

Blessing

May God's blessing descend upon us all through God's grace and love for all people and all of creation, now and forever. Amen.