

26th January, 2025

The paper-version Service



To Begin: Find a Bible and a comfortable place. If safe, light a candle and read prayerfully through the service. If you have access to worship music, choose a song and listen to it as you begin or read, or even sing, the song from this Sunday's

Service.

Opening Prayer: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name; through Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Hymn:

Your hand, O God, has guided
your flock from age to age;
your faithfulness is written
on history's open page.
Our fathers owned your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both to this bear witness:
one church, one faith, one Lord!

Your heralds brought the gospel
to greatest and the least;
they summoned men and women
to share the great King's feast.

And this was all their teaching
in ev'ry deed and word,
to all alike proclaiming:
one church, one faith, one Lord!

Your mercy will not fail us
nor leave your work undone;
with your right hand to help us
the vict'ry shall be won.
And then by earth and heaven
your name shall be adored;
and this shall be our anthem:
one church, one faith, one Lord!.

The Sermon by Sarah Giles

Read Isaiah 30:18-22 and Mark 9:30-50 – Being Teacher

I'll start by introducing myself. (This is relevant, I promise!) I'm Sarah, I'm a Christian. I'm a vegan. I'm autistic. I work as a writer and editor. In the great 'love it or hate it' marmite debate, I'm one of the people who loves it. I am in favour of pineapple on pizza. I love the TV show 'Sherlock', the Radio 4 comedy 'Cabin Pressure', and the band Crowded House. I'm an only child, I was born in Dorset, and I grew up near Petersfield. I'm a remainer, a Welsh-language learner, and an introvert. I prefer dogs to cats, I prefer autumn to summer, and I pronounce scone to rhyme with 'gone', not 'cone'. These are some of the things that make me who I am.

There are lots of ways in which society – and our own thinking – tries to divide people into 'us' and 'them'. When you read that description of who I am, you probably automatically sorted it into ways in which I am like you and different from you, almost subconsciously. Psychology and sociology refer to this type of thinking as categorising people into 'in-groups' (people like us) and 'out-groups' (people who are different from us. Often we do it in a split second, just by looking at someone and making a judgement. Is this person someone I gravitate towards, or will I try to avoid them? (See James 2:1–4.)

I've divided this week's passage into three sections which I've titled Welcome, Weirdness, and Weeding.

Welcome (verses 30–37)

We join Jesus and the disciples in the middle of a practical teaching session. They've just found themselves unable to drive out a spirit from a boy, and Jesus has explained that 'this sort can come out only by prayer' (Mark 9:29). He then tries to tell them that he is going to be killed and resurrected, but they don't understand. Then they start arguing about which of them is the greatest. Jesus asks them what they're arguing about (verse 33) and they don't answer, because they're embarrassed, but he knows anyway, because he explains to them what greatness looks like: 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all' (verse 35). He illustrates this point by bringing a child into their midst and telling the disciples that welcoming a child is welcoming him, and in turn, welcoming God the Father. Children had no status in the culture Jesus and the disciples were in. They weren't listened to, they were regarded as not having anything to contribute. For the disciples, and for many others, they would have been an 'out-group', probably regarded as not worth their time or consideration

unless they were a family member. But Jesus turns that upside-down. It's precisely this group who he tells us to welcome, regardless of any stigma or social discomfort. That's what he regards as greatness.

Weirdness (verses 39–41)

Next, John tells Jesus that the disciples had seen someone driving out demons in Jesus's name and they had told him to stop because he was not one of them (verse 38). This is someone who was doing the thing the disciples had previously been unable to do, so perhaps there was a bit of jealousy at play here, but there was definitely a feeling of 'this man is a member of the "out-group", encroaching on our territory'. Jesus tells John this is the wrong course of action, and they shouldn't stop him, because they are on the same side, working in Jesus's name. There is no 'out-group' here! Just because someone is not in our immediate circle does not make them wrong or weird! We could apply this principle in lots of ways. Perhaps someone goes to a church of a different denomination, or one with a different style of worship, or one where they have different ideas about baptism or communion or women in leadership or a whole range of other issues. Perhaps they go to COGS or St Andrew's and hold slightly different views from yours. Jesus says 'whoever is not against us is for us'. You might think they're a bit weird, but Jesus says we're on the same team. Consider them part of your 'in-group'.

Weeding (verses 42–50)

In these verses, Jesus's language is dramatic. He talks about drowning people and chopping off hands and feet if they lead us to sin. He is speaking metaphorically, not literally, in a way that was common in the Jewish culture of the day. Please don't perform your own amputations at home! But although we shouldn't take this *literally*, we should still take the principle *seriously*. To use a gardening analogy, when we think about sin in our lives, we should be committing to weeding, not pruning. To weed out sin is to dig it all out, removing the plant everyone can see and the roots that are below the surface. We're not called to prune our sin back enough to make it look socially acceptable. Jesus wants us to dig it out completely. It might be painful, like cutting off a hand or foot. But it is beneficial in allowing the good in our lives to thrive.

So taking these three strands of Jesus's teaching in this passage, how can we apply them in a way that makes a difference this week?

- **Welcome:** we can commit to catching and challenging our prejudices and snap judgements, welcoming and serving those who are different from us.

- **Weirdness:** we can seek out ways to work in partnership with other Christians who do things differently. Collaboration promotes unity.
- **Weeding:** we can prayerfully consider what sin we need to weed out of our lives. Perhaps it's something we've been pruning to make it look respectable, but it needs to be fully removed.

Let's remember though, we're not called to do this in our own strength. God loves to help us and he will be delighted to work with us on this as we ask him to make us more like him.

3rd Sunday of Epiphany: Almighty God, whose Son revealed in signs and miracles the wonder of your saving presence: renew your people with your heavenly grace, and in all our weakness sustain us by your mighty power; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **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. 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 forever. Amen.*

Blessing to be declared over yourselves, St Andrews and The Good Shepherd, the communities around us and our whole nation. 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace.' (Numbers 6:24-26 NIV).

At the Church of the Good Shepherd

- Tea and Chat: February 15th at 2pm in the Church Hall.
- Tea and Bowls: February 15th at 2pm in the Church.
- Coffee and Questions: February 26th at 10.30 in the Church Hall.
- The Community Cupboard, 2:45pm every Thursday in Church.

For Further information:

This paper and all parish details are on the website at <https://www.parishofmedsteadandfourmarks.co.uk>