

## **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> October 2023: CIRCUIT BIG SUNDAY**



Churches throughout the Central Norfolk Methodist Circuit, and the morning online service via the Zoom platform, are using this material today. The YouTube recording of the worship sheet is also available (on the Watton Methodist website from 27<sup>th</sup>) for use by individuals and churches. The zoom service is at 10.30 am on the usual Circuit Worship link (text 07912 379101 for details of link).

### **Welcome from Rev Jacqui**

Hello, and welcome to our ninth Big Sunday service. In this District year of prayer known as 'Pray 2-3', we are devoting two Big Sundays to prayer and the theme of this second one is 'Reflective Prayer'. We are praying in a reflective way, Julian is talking to us about his own journey into contemplative prayer, and we have gentler hymns than usual. We also have a PowerPoint reflection that is accompanied by music composed, and performed, by Liz Lodge (member of Tittleshall). However, we are beginning with a more rousing hymn as we start with the praise of God our creator and sustainer: 'How great thou art'.

**Hymn StF 82 MP 506 'O Lord my God!' by Stuart K Hine (1899 – 1989)**

### **Opening Prayers**

God of grace, as we come before you in our worship, help us to focus our minds and hearts on you. There are so many things calling for our attention! The world around us is often chaotic and filled with troubling news. We have personal worries and needs. Help us for just these moments to lay our concerns aside, as we focus on your presence with us.

The Psalmist says the person who delights in your law "is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither –whatever they do prospers."

As we worship you today, may we imagine our spiritual roots going deep, holding us securely on the river bank, drawing from the living water that flows beside us.

The tree breathes through its leaves. As we quietly focus on our breath, the breath you give us, may we imagine breathing in your spirit of hope, breathing out worry; breathing in your spirit of peace, breathing out fear.

We breathe in ...and out... taking this precious moment to be still.

*(Pause)*

As we focus on sending our roots deeper into you, the giver of life and hope; as we imagine breathing in the Holy Spirit; may we be your fruitful people, yielding good fruit in season.

May all that we are and all that we do bring honour and glory to your name, today and always. Amen

**Rev Anne**

**Hymn StF 495 H&P 673 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind' by John G Whittier (1807 – 1892)**

**Bible Reading: Psalm 46**

### **Meditation**

*It is tempting to use many words in devotions but there are times when less words can be very powerful. For this meditation we use the words of a well-known hymn, which is itself based on Psalm 46. Each line removes some words and so we become more and more focussed on the essence of its meaning.*

*NOTE: To be spoken slowly with a short pause between each line and a longer pause between each verse.*

Be still and know that I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be.

I am the Lord who saves and heals.

I am the Lord who saves.

I am the Lord.

I am.

I.

In you, O Lord, I put my trust.

In you, O Lord, I put.

In you, O lord, I.

In you, O Lord.

In you.

Be, I, in you.      **Deacon Jen**

**Hymn StF 18 MP 48 'Be still and know that I am God'** by an anonymous author

**Bible Reading:** Mark 1 v 35 – 39

### **Talk**

On several occasions in the Gospels, we read that Jesus deliberately retreated to a place of solitude and silence, to be alone and pray. This regular rhythm of retreating and stepping back from the busyness and demands of his earthly ministry is, I believe, instructive to us as Christian disciples.

At one level, it is a timely reminder of the importance of prayer within the life of faith – if it was important for Jesus, then the chances are that it is also important for us too, as his followers! Each of us is called to a life of abiding in Christ, where we take the time and space to nurture our ongoing relationship with the divine – sometimes we must step back, relinquish the demands, cease the doing and stop! The first challenge is always clearing the space and time, both physically and mentally, so that we are in a frame of mind and heart to pray. At another level, the story of Jesus withdrawing to a place of solitude to pray, speaks to me about the tradition of contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is the practice of silence, where we center our inmost self in the presence of God, and we simply rest in the restorative presence of God. It is a form of prayer that is characterized by a radical simplicity – it is free of words, formal liturgy, or intercession. As someone once described it 'it is a long loving look at the real.' Within this practice of prayer, we quite simply receive God's gaze of love and return God's gaze of love. It will be obvious that this form of prayer is content-light as opposed to content-laden and it is reminder that sometimes to be in the presence of God, is to experience God as the one who is beyond words or comprehension, and therefore we rest in an adoring wondrous silence. There are scriptural examples of where characters encounter God in the gift of silence – take for example the story of Elijah in 1 Kings chapter 19. After his encounter with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, he flees for his life and comes to the Mount of Horeb. It is here on the mountain top, that he is instructed to go and stand at the edge of the mountain for the Lord is about to pass by. What follows is rather fascinating – God is not present in the noisy, demonstrative, and ear-splitting sound of wind, earthquake, or fire but instead God becomes deeply present in the '***sound of sheer silence***'. I have always imagined that the silence that is described is not the absence of sound, but instead a wondrous, mystical silence that is pregnant with the mystery and presence of God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. At a personal level, my own practice of prayer, over a period of many years, has moved in the direction of silence and contemplation. This has been a long and evolving journey of discovery. In the final part of this talk, I want to articulate what I feel I have gained from this evolving journey of practicing contemplative prayer.

**Firstly**, it has deepened my relationship with God because I have spent time in the presence of God and have allowed myself to be enfolded by the restorative love of God in the silence. It has also enabled me to become more receptive to God's call because I have become more ready to listen – sometimes (not always) a thought, image, verse of scripture or a particular feeling becomes apparent in the silence, and I take the time to ponder what this might mean and what God might be saying to me.

**Secondly**, the practice of contemplative prayer has given me a sense of balance and perspective amid the many demands of work and life. We live in a very noisy, intrusive, and information laden society where our attention is constantly being diverted by electronic notifications and 24-hour news coverage. The invitation to withdraw to a place of solitude and silence with God becomes like a well of refreshment in the wilderness – it is here where I center my heart in the place of deepest rest, nurture, and peace. I then seek to minister and live from this still center in God.

**Finally**, the practice of contemplative prayer has liberated me from the tyranny of many words! As I reflect retrospectively on my Christian journey of faith, I know that I often labored with a sense of guilt, that perhaps, I had not said enough words, I had not prayed for enough people and situations or that somehow, I had failed God through my lack of intercession. The journey towards a more contemplative spirituality has become like a source of freedom – I am content to rest in the gift of silence – recognizing that often this is far deeper than words and brings fresh insights into the nature of God.

In all of this, I am not saying that there is no place for words, the liturgy of the Church, and spoken intercessions – these have their place, and they are important, not least for the public worship of the Christian Church. However, I am saying that prayer is a great treasure and mystery and there is lots to discover if we are prepared to journey and learn from the great riches of the Christian Tradition. I want to leave you with the words of a beautiful poem / prayer by Joyce Rupp – its is based upon Song of Songs 2:8-12:

**Beckoner:**

*You tap at the window of my heart.*

*You knock at the door of my busyness.*

*You call out in my night dreams.*

*You whisper in my haphazard prayer.*

*You beckon. You invite. You entice.*

*You woo. You holler, You insist:*

*‘Come! Come into my waiting embrace.*

*Rest your turmoil in my easy silence.*

*Put aside your heavy bag of burdens.*

*Accept the simple peace I offer you.      Rev Julian*

**Hymn StF 20 MP 50 ‘Be still for the presence of the Lord’** by David J Evans (b 1957)

**Prayers**

*In this prayer, I will be using the metaphor of God as a Dreamer, who dreamed all things into being. I use this metaphor to invite you to use your imagination in these prayers.*

*There are moments where there are cues for our senses, such as “bitter smoke and ash”. These are to encourage you to imagine those things in that moment; and the prayer is open enough for you to make your own connections to that sense and what you desire to pray for. Collectively, we will be praying together the ‘same’ prayers but putting into it our own imaginations and contributing to the prayers individually. Even if we don’t have words to our prayers, God receives them and “knows what you need before you ask him” (cf. Matthew 6:8).*

*I also invite anyone who is leading the prayers to have a quiet bell, chime, tuning fork or singing bowl at these points to help bring our attention to our imagination. When I do these prayers, I use a singing bowl, which has a constant ring to it, but you may want to do these prayers differently.*

Great Dreamer, whose imagination has cast all things into being.

Beautiful dreams, creating colour and form, guided by your love.

Desires constructing all that is by your goodness,

full of life and swelling with energy.

Deep calls to deep at the intensity of your presence;  
creation swirls with patterns from the imprint  
of your mind dreaming in all and with all.  
Your beautiful dreams, though, are sullied by what should not be;  
your Being calls to our being,  
but we disquiet, unsettle and disrupt what you guide us to.

*Charred earth and trees;  
the thick smell of metal in the air;  
Arid, searing heat;  
bitter smoke and ash;  
shouts of rage and hate;  
Weak and protesting stomachs;  
Cracked and weeping lips;  
Scorning and indignant eyes.*

Let us take refuge in your dreams once more,  
over the squalls of the waters.

Let us rest in the shade of your Being,  
away from the prickling heat of those nightmares.

Take what is and guide it into a pleasant dream,  
one that is pleasing to you, our Great Dreamer.

Imagine your goodness into the world once more;  
allow your thoughts to flow into realms of joy and splendour again.

Brush your mind against ours,  
to feel the softness of your pinions once more. Amen.

Rev Jonny

**Reflective Pictures on PowerPoint** with accompanying music by Liz Lodge

**Offertory** (and Lord's Prayer if you want to use it)

### **Final Prayer**

*By the Christian writer David Adam ('Celtic Prayers' booklet) and read by Rev Jacqui*

Peace between me / and each friend  
Peace in the morning / and at the day's end  
Peace in each hour / and in the whole day  
Peace on my journey / and all of the way  
Peace in the work / that I need to do  
Peace in my life / Peace comes from you.

**Hymn StF 545 H&P 378 'Be thou my vision'** Irish 8<sup>th</sup> century, translated and versified.

**May the blessing of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us, and all those we love, this day and always, Amen.**

### **Circuit and wider News:**

The next Big Sunday will be on the next 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday – 31<sup>st</sup> December. As this is the week after Christmas and, in fact, New Year's Eve, we recognise that many people may be away or otherwise engaged. And so, this service will be simpler than usual using carols/hymns and a short exploration of the gospel set for this Sunday in Year B – the account of Simeon and Anna meeting the baby Jesus in the Temple.

Please continue to pray for the stationing process as the Circuit seeks a new Superintendent for September 2024. Please especially pray for Rev Julian as he has many conversations with circuits and ministers on the move, and prepares for the stationing matching meeting in early November.