

Worship at Christchurch 28th February 2021

As we worship 'together – apart' I pray that you will feel God's presence as we read and learn of His word. I invite you now to find time to be still, perhaps to light a candle and play some music reflecting on the images, knowing that others are sharing this act of worship with you.



Opening Prayer

Jesus lead us to the Father by your Spirit; help us draw near.
As we come with awe and gladness, help us draw near.

Hymn - Be Still for the Presence of the Lord - StF 20

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOCfPjLOvC4>

Prayers

Let us pray together

God of all grace

We come before you to praise you, mindful that you are the God of our ancestors,
the God who made and keeps your promises. In Christ you showed us love that was willing to die on a cross
for us. The Holy Spirit lives in our hearts and we rejoice that she binds us together as a family of faith.
For these things we rejoice.

We are thankful for the wonder of nature that captivates us. We are thankful for all those people we love
and care about and who bring great joy to our lives.

Yet we know that we do not live as your children or keep your commandments. If you kept a record of our
sins, we could not stand. Joyously we know that through Christ's abundance grace we are forgiven
Thanks be to God.

Amen

Readings:

Genesis 17: 1-7,15-16.

17 When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty^[a]; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. ² Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers." ³ Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, ⁴ "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. ⁵ No longer will you be called Abram^[b]; your name will be Abraham^[c] for I have made you a father of many nations. ⁶ I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ¹⁵ God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. ¹⁶ I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save their life ^[b] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶ What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? ³⁷ Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ³⁸ If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Hymn - The Servant King - StF 272 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCAdWs-ZyEk>

Reflection

Don't you just love it when a plan comes together? And hate it when the best laid plans get thwarted? Depending on our personal experiences of the past year we will all have had setbacks; be it that holiday promised or more importantly precious milestones missed. Families and friends not seen in person and however amazing zoom is, it can never replace the physical touch. Things we perhaps took for granted in the past have now become so much more special and we do look forward to better times ahead: as a friend wrote there is: 'warmth at the end of the tunnel if not yet an abundance of light!'

Just a year ago I was taking the anniversary service at Newbury Methodist Church, a church that had welcomed me as a young teacher in 1977 when I started my long career at Mary Hare school for the Deaf. We were at the stage of not shaking hands, very difficult for a preacher welcoming people at the door. There were no hugs and we were becoming accustomed to elbow bumps. It was a scary time as we heard stories from other countries but not prevalent, or at least not reported, in the UK.

David and I had just returned from Brazil where 2 cases had been reported and the next day flew to Florida where cases in the USA were confined mainly to New York. We discussed how different China, Italy and New York were from our own UK and carried on with life as normal. Then we were told that the USA was closed to citizens of countries including the UK and eventually we came home via a repatriation flight to Gatwick. It was eerily quiet but the checks we had thought would be there were not, and we just walked through an empty Gatwick; stopping at M&S Simply Food to grab as much as we could knowing we had no food at home! We had heard about the toilet roll shortage!!

That was 23rd March, the morning of the day that the UK started its first lockdown. We had no idea how devastating it would be with so many lives lost, lives upended, schools closed, home schooling, loved ones missed and day to day living so impacted. Who could have predicted that a trip to the supermarket could be so significant, an outing to be vaccinated a thrilling occasion? And our secret weapon as a nation – that we are so excellent at queuing!

All this is so in sync with the readings set for today, In Genesis, Abraham at 99 (even if we assume ages may have been recorded differently it is still a good age) is given the promise of the covenant: the promise to God's people. This may have been a great honour, but to be based on his wife (age 90) giving birth to a son;

it is no wonder that verse 17; so often left out of this reading: says: 'Abraham fell face down and laughed'. How could this be? But God's plan is not thwarted. Sarah will have a son and call him Isaac (meaning he laughs) and we can only imagine the following conversations in that relationship. God's plans are fulfilled, even if it is not quite what people expected.

Fast forward to Mark, writing his gospel for Christians living in Rome fearing persecution and possibly from his experience as an eyewitness in his early life. He writes of the purpose of the life of Jesus. Oh, the plans that the disciples must have had, Jesus the answer to all their troubles, the ability to free them of the Roman yoke. But in this reading, we hear Peter, upset that Jesus seemed to be sharing other plans, plans that he could not accept and did not understand. Do not you love Peter, so often saying what others are thinking. I personally have a great deal of affinity with that Peter, when friends say: 'Oh Sandra, she says it how it is', I think it's meant to be complimentary although I was often told that my comments were not helpful in meetings. Generally, in fact I was not trying to be helpful, often challenging ideas! I digress.

Back to the passage. Peter cannot believe what he is hearing, how can this be? How can this wholly good man, leading them to a life of freedom, healing so many, die a criminal's death? And yet we are told that he has not understood God's plan, one he sees as so different from his own. Jesus rebukes him. How crushing that must have been for Peter, the one you look up to, have given your livelihood up for, rebukes you. Peter's words were only out of care for his friend, why would anyone want to hurt this good man? This adds to the difficulty of the next verses because not only has their friend to suffer but they too will be called to take up this same cross.

Here we must place the cross into the context of the day. This punishment was only too real to the disciples. Crucifixion was one of the most shameful and brutal ways to die. It was perfected by the Romans and thousands died this way. Mostly those who dared to question Roman rule. The cross was not the one of images painted by the Victorians, it was a cross erected at eye level, much like the stocks in England. People could look the person in the eye, spit, and hurl insults, mocking those set to die this horrific death.

How could this be the plan for their friend? But again, God has other plans. His son, His beloved, dies on the cross for us. It is made clear in this reading from Mark that Christ must suffer and die. Even though it was written in the scriptures that the disciples would have known well, it is still hard for them to comprehend. His choosing to suffer for them, for us, for you and me, out of pure obedience and love. It is hard for Peter to understand and remains difficult for so many people to understand to this day.

And so, to our challenge this Lent. Christ is faithful to His calling and because of this we can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be faithful to our calling to follow Him. Are we prepared to take up our cross and follow Him, whatever that means and wherever it takes us?

We hear stories of many things that people have achieved through this strange year and maybe, like me, you will feel rather inadequate. No novel written, no new instrument or language learned but a few drawers cleared out and a realisation that I do not need to dye my hair! We are called to be kind to ourselves, it is so easy to beat ourselves with things we have not done. The plans that have been thwarted, our lives on hold. As we pick up, lament, and reflect, we will all have played our part.

You may be interested in the following that Luther wrote in 1527: 'What else is the epidemic but a fire which instead of consuming wood and straw devours life and body? You ought to think this way: Very well, by God's decree the enemy has sent us poison and deadly garbage. Therefore, I will ask God mercifully to

protect us. Then I will disinfect, help purify the air, give and take medicine. I will avoid places and persons where my presence is not needed in order not to become contaminated and thus perhaps infect and transmit it to others, and so cause their death as a result of my negligence.' *Martin Luther from: 'Whether One May Flee From a Deadly Plague'*

We offer our prayers through this Lent with the hope that Christ's death on the cross offers. Remembering all Christ has done and continues to do for us, those we love and our world. Just look at how God used Peter after Christ's death and Resurrection. We know that Good Friday was not the end; but that's another sermon. Peter becomes the rock on which Christ's church is built and becomes the orator of such great speeches as this in Acts, indicating just how he had learned to understand God's plan. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men,^[a] put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.' (Acts 2 23 – 24)

We pray that we may clearly see God's plan for us and our world as we slowly emerge from the strangest of years, knowing that the same God still walks alongside us. Hold fast to the wonderful passage from Joshua 29: '11 For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.' It may not always be clear, we may at times feel thwarted but remember that we are all in God's loving care. He knows us by name. Are we listening today as we prepare to take up our cross and follow Him on our Lenten journey?

Hymn - Beyond these walls of worship - StF 547

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A2eEBTNsic&list=RDGMEMMib4QpREwENw3>

Prayers of Intercession

As we walk into the long weeks of Lent, we begin a journey into the wilderness: may your Spirit rest upon us. We travel from suffering to hope may your Spirit rest upon us We travel through death to new life: may your Spirit rest upon us. As we look to the example of Jesus, who in the wilderness chose the difficult path, help us to know that you are with us – though the way ahead may be hard, and we so often falter and fail. Strengthen us for the journey ahead and teach us to trust in you.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it

We walk in relative security, thankful for the comforts we know.

We pray for people who cannot afford to work from home and ask that we would address the inequality this shows us.

We give thanks for the peace we experience, and ask that our church communities can offer hope and safety for those in distress.

May we share what we have, and work to lift the burden that others carry.

As we look to the example of Jesus, who embraced all who were in pain, may we reach out to others in generosity and kindness.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it

We walk in our troubled world, full of anxiety at the conflict we see - in Iraq, in Iran, in the Sahel region, in Myanmar, Somalia and in Yemen: bring your peace we pray.

We are aware of the finite resources of our earth: may we limit our destructive habits.
As we look to the example of Jesus, who lived in simplicity and trust, and as we are asked again to follow him; may we free ourselves from all that holds us back, and trust in your promise that you will never leave us,

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it

We walk in separation, apart from friends and those we love: give us strength to endure in hope.
We pray especially for all who are burdened by loneliness; for all who are in pain; for the bereaved and the despairing; the sick and the dying: may we work to make our communities places of warmth and friendship where all are included and each one finds a place.
As we look to the example of Jesus, who welcomed the least and the lost and brought the overlooked into the light, may we extend our circle of belonging and believe that your love is big enough for all to enter in.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it

We walk in hope for a future as the rollout of the vaccine continues across the UK, and there are signs of success in the data as death rates among over 80s fall.
We give thanks for the work of the NHS as they administer vaccines to the public and manage long lists of people needing urgent surgery.
May we be mindful of countries yet to begin vaccination, and countries who cannot afford the vaccines, and we ask that governments would enable fair distribution.
When we begin to emerge from crisis, may we work to build a better world where the poorest are protected.
As we look to the example of Jesus, who placed such great value on children, may we create a space where the young can dream again, and all of us can grow, rest and be secure.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it

In love you made us;
in love you call us;
in love you lead us –
through this world,
through sorrow and joy,
until we see you face to face.

Your kingdom comes near to those who call on your name; your pathway is surrounded by love.

Teach us to walk in it. Amen.

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 for ever.

Amen.

Hymn - When I survey the wondrous cross - StF 287

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9EikGeNuoBA>

A prayer of blessing

May we know the faithfulness of God in our lives,

may we live with the assurance we are children of God and know ourselves to be loved.

May we find ourselves faithful even amidst temptation. Amen