

Christchurch Methodist Church, Marlborough
Fifth Sunday of Easter Order of Service
2nd May 2021 at 10.30am

Welcome to this week's worship, whether you are using this worship sheet or joining in the streamed service from the church. We worship knowing that we are coming into the presence of God with the Church family.

Let us spend a few moments in quiet, as we prepare ourselves for worship. Maybe light a candle, or gaze in wonder at what you can see out the window, knowing that God sees you preparing to worship and focusing on him.

Call to Worship –

I will sing of the Lord's great love for ever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.
²I will declare that your love stands firm for ever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself. (Psalm 89:1-2)

Hymn – Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words
“Crown him with many crowns!” StF 347

Prayer and the Lord's Prayer – use your own words to express the glory and splendour of God.

Readings

Psalm 22:25-31 (NIV)

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Hymn – Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words
“I watch the sunrise lighting the sky” StF 469 – (YouTube version - <https://youtu.be/0kiJrPJawuw>)

Reflection - **God is Love – 1 John 4:8, 16**

One of my favourite films and musicals as a child was Lionel Bart's "Oliver" starring Ron Moody as Fagin, Oliver Reed as Bill Sykes, Harry Secombe as Mr Bumble and introducing Mark Lester as Oliver amongst many others. It made a deep impression on me when I first saw it on the big screen at the Odeon Cinema, Torquay, when we were on holiday. The following Christmas I was given the book, "Oliver" which was full of stills from the film. I didn't read Charles Dickens' novel until it was one of my "O" Level English Literature set texts, but when I did, many of the sets from the film came to mind. One of the big scenes is the "Please sir, may I have some more?" one. The book gave a double page spread to Oliver walking timidly to the front, being watched by tables of ragged boys, and the grey walls of the workhouse forming the backdrop. Behind Oliver, in large letters, in the brickwork, was the text from 1 John 4:8 and 16, "God is Love". The words were there, but the actions, which should go with the words, were absent.

To begin with, the workhouse is such a dreary, dull, bleak, grey, cold place. A place which was deliberately made awful to put people off from wanting to go there. Sadly, just as today, people were homeless through no fault of their own. They were unfortunately the victims of poverty and circumstances beyond their control. They had no choice and, as a last resort, with feelings of shame and disgrace, had to enter the workhouse. Eating in that miserable hall, it would be hard, if not impossible to see that "God is love".

For me, God's love is not grey, dreary, bleak or cold, but colourful, full of hope and joy, and warm. We see God's love all around us in the wonders of creation, in the colours of creation. God's love is in the bright colours of spring, the amazing colours of sunrise and sunset, the vibrant colours of flowers and nature, the sky, the sea and the earth. God's love is full of the colour and warm, like feeling the warmth of the sun on your back, or the heat from a glowing fire as you sit beside it.

We see God's love most clearly in Jesus. He certainly wasn't dull, grey or cold. His ministry is full of colour, such as his colourful parables. His teaching did not involve dreary lectures on the Law or complicated doctrine, but colourful stories about lost sheep, treasure found in fields, lousy sowers, lost coins, the birds of the air, vineyard workers, the spending of family fortunes on wild living and bad feelings between brothers, wedding banquet and so on. Jesus' ministry enfolds people in the warmth of knowing that they are accepted and valuable to God, as he heals the lepers, makes the blind see, befriends the lonely and welcomes little children. God is love and his love is full of colour and warmth.

The essence of the workhouse scene is also the complete opposite of what it is to declare that "God is love". We remember how Oliver has to ask for more because the boys are hungry. The thin, revolting gruel does little to satisfy their appetite. They want more to eat and so they draw straws to see who should

carry out this dangerous task. As we know, poor Oliver draws the short straw and, after the meal, has to ask for more to eat. How unlike, in the kingdom of God, where there will be no need to ask for more at the heavenly banquet.

God is love because he is a generous God, whose love knows no limits. One of the things which I admire about the Jewish faith is how much of their spiritual life takes place round the table, with festivals and feasting forming important parts of their religious year. Every Friday evening as the sabbath begins, the Jewish people gather round the table. Then there are the festivals such as the Passover, with the meal being one of the highlights of the year, when the story of the Exodus is retold through the eating of the unleavened bread and the lamb. The unleavened bread reminds them that their ancestors ate in a hurry, with no time for the bread to rise, and the lamb recalls how its blood was smeared on the doorposts so that the angel of death would pass over them. The food is wholesome and plentiful and the whole family are involved. No one is excluded and it is the youngest who has the important role of asking the questions for the story to unfold about God hearing the people's cries and calling Moses to lead them out of slavery in Egypt.

God's love and faithfulness is celebrated in the Passover, but God's love is seen most clearly in Jesus. In an upper room in Jerusalem, with those whom he loved until the end, Jesus took the bread and wine of the Passover and related it to his suffering and dying for us. He left us the wonderful gift of sharing bread and wine to enable us to remember his extremely generous gift of his life to give us life, eternal life, through his sacrifice on the cross. This is the climax of his ministry, but throughout the gospels we see Jesus generously giving his time and energy to people, even when he had not had time to eat and he wanted rest, (Mark 6:31-34).

When we see God's generous love throughout the Bible and so clearly in Jesus, we too want to respond with generosity. It always encourages me to see how generously people give to people in need. The Food Bank is one example where it is heart warming to see, not just the basic necessities in the Food Bank basket, but also chocolate, special biscuits, expensive cereals and other items which we may think of as treats. The generous God invites us to an abundant life, (Isaiah 55:1-5 and the whole chapter), loves us deeply and we respond with generous love.

There is a third reason why the "God is love" text is not appropriate in the workhouse dining hall. The workhouse is a place of fear. The boys are kept under control by cruel and violent punishments, and Oliver is terrified as he approaches the staff to ask for more to eat. As a child, Mr Bumble was terrifying. That is unless you saw the amateur production which Hannah saw with her primary school, when Mr Bumble made so many mistakes, that they nicknamed him "Mr Stumble"! Mr Bumble and company are not examples of

the fact that "God is love", as "there is no fear in love", (1 John 4:18). Rather, as John's letter continues, "fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love". The workhouse ran on fear and when Oliver feels the whole world is against him, he sings one of the hits of the musical, "Where is love?" It wasn't to be found under the "God is love" in the workhouse.

I am sure that we have all lived in fear of something or someone at some time or other in our lives. We may have fearfully faced a health, financial, legal, family or work difficulty. We may have lived in fear of a school teacher, family member, neighbour, boss, or numerous other people. I remember my Mother reminiscing about the chapel which she attended as a child, between Hartland and Clovelly in North Devon. Whenever there was a harvest supper, an anniversary tea, or a gathering involving food, one lady always exclaimed, "I'll make the cake"! Many lived in terror of getting told off if they produced anything which resembled a cake. The story was told with a smile and "I'll make the cake!" was a family saying. Although it is a funny story, it highlights how the church is made up of fallible people. There should of course be no fear in a loving, caring community of God's people.

God is love and his love drives out fear. God's love is not a theory or philosophy. It is a reality which we know and experience in our relationship with God. As John explains in his letter, we know that God loves us because he revealed his love to us by sending "his only Son into the world so that we might live through him". This reminds us of Jesus' words to Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life", (John 3:16). Paul puts it another way, when he writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us", (Romans 5:8). As God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another, (1 John 4:11). This is the commandment that Jesus gave us, to love one another as he first loved us, (John 15:12). So, God's love for us flows through our relationship with him and with Jesus and into our love for one another.

Oliver, leaves the workhouse and eventually finds love. In Dicken's novel, there is one point where Oliver lives in a house in the country. He comes to live there as Bill Sykes takes Oliver on a night of crime and makes Oliver enter the house through a small window. Oliver then had to open the door to let Sykes in so that he could steal the family silver. The crime goes wrong. Sykes gets away, but Oliver is shot and found by the owner of the house. Oliver is forgiven and lives with the family whom he has helped Bill Sykes to burgle. Oliver is so grateful for their love and kindness that one morning, before breakfast, he leaves the house and goes out to gather flowers for the family. This was not much, but a small way in which he could show his love for them.

God love us and we show our love for God and one another by carrying out numerous acts of care, love and kindness as we go about our daily lives.

When we love one another, then God lives in us and is perfected in us. By this, we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he gives us his Spirit, (1 John 4:12-13). John again emphasises the relationship between God, Jesus and us when he writes, "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives (or abides) in them and they in God" (1 John 4:15).

It is knowing that we abide in God's love and he abides in us that drives out all fear. We know this, but I wonder if fear does sometimes creep in, especially when things aren't going smoothly and the future is uncertain? Jesus says, "that If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you" (John 15:7). If you are like me, you have probably asked for things, and I don't mean the new bicycle when you were ten years old, but serious life moments and you haven't received them. There may have been times when God feels distant and that he is not abiding in us. We may have felt abandoned and alone. In Pete Greig's book, "God on Mute" and on the prayer course, we are encouraged by knowing that we are not alone in these feelings and thoughts about God.

Pete Greig quotes Jesus crying out to "Abba, Father" in his despair and deepest need in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then Pete continues, "When we are scared and hurting, when life feels chaotic and out of control, it is more important than ever to anchor ourselves in the absolute and eternal truth that we are dearly loved and deeply held by the most powerful being in the universe. Let this be the great non-negotiable in our lives, the platform for all our other thoughts, and the plumbline for our prayers", (Pete Greig, "God on Mute", p.49, David C Cook, 2007, 2020).

"God is love" stands out on the end wall of the dining hall, above a scene which is far removed from God's love. It leads us to think about what that text really means when we say, "God is love" and that he abides in us and we in him. His love is colourful and warm, generous and drives out fear. Whether we are rejoicing or grieving, energetic or tired, hopeful or despairing, peaceful or fearful, trusting or doubting, close to God or distant, sure or uncertain, let us remember that it is all right to feel in these ways. However we feel, or wherever we are on our faith journey, let us be assured that God is with us as a church and as individuals. God loves you dearly and holds you deeply within his everlasting arms. He is the most powerful force in the universe. As Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, all things are possible with God. How wonderful to know that God loves you with a Father's tender, loving care. God is love and our Lord Jesus is the best example we have of love. Jesus' life, death and resurrection shows us that we are loved so deeply by him that he gave everything to give us life. So, we respond in love and abide in his amazing, divine love. He abides in us through his Spirit, so that we too

can love one another as he first loved us. As we live day by day, we bring the colour, the warmth and the generosity of God's love to everything we do, say or think, driving out fear and enabling others to see that "God is love". Amen.

Hymn – Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words –

“Jesus stand among us / Here is bread” StF 30 / 586 (YouTube version
- <https://youtu.be/9SzM5ITyljc>)

Prayers of Intercession

Offer prayers using your own words for the needs of the world, your family and friends and yourself

Hymn – Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words –
“Love divine, all loves excelling” StF 503

The Blessing

May the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you his peace, now and always.

Amen.