

3rd October 2021

The Free Church (United Reformed) St Ives

Opening Prayer

Lord of all, in awe and wonder we worship you.

We step aside from our daily activities to bring them before you. We bring ourselves – our strengths and weaknesses, our faith and doubts, our hopes and our fears. We bring our families, our friends and neighbours – those we love those we know and those whom we pass in the street. We bring our town, our country and our world – places near and far, we entrust all into your care knowing that your love and power are greater than we can imagine. Meet with us now, minister to us and encourage us to be your faithful people.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to say when we pray:

Our Father

Sermon

In our society there are some extremely wealthy people – royalty, rich business people, highly paid government officials, bankers, entertainers, sports personalities etc. Whilst many who are struggling to cope; some needing foodbank to eek out social assistance till the end of the month, others homeless and others who are refugees, seeking safety and security.

Are we aware that God cares about this vast social and economic disparity? Or do we think that God only cares about people's spiritual well-being? Is our spiritual well-being related to our social, physical and material being or are they utterly separate? Some would like us to keep religion to Sundays and politics to politicians.

Our gospel reading today shows that God does care about the poor as much as the rich and our material physical economic well-being is much connected to our spiritual well-being. This is not new, in the past through monasteries the church looked after the whole person. It was the church who started hospitals, schools and provided shelter and alms funds for the poor.

Yet in our society today the church is largely seen as irrelevant – no longer necessary – the government is seen as responsible for caring for the wellbeing of its citizens. The social welfare state is supposed to curb the excesses of the capitalist system and to help the poor. ... But many are falling through the cracks. Just this week we learned that Universal credit is going to lose the £20 that raised the subsistence amount to live on, gas and electricity prices are going to go up, and

In our psalm today we hear of the majesty and sovereignty and greatness of God, and has made human beings only a little lower than God, crowning us with glory and honour. As human beings we are made in the image of God. We are physical, social, spiritual and intelligent beings. God has created us to be co-stewards of creation. Human beings matter to God, who values us, giving us dignity. The image of a family

is applied to all people – under God we are brothers and sisters – God loves us all and wants us to love each other... How sad it is, that so often we don't.

The Hebrews passage also reminds us that God values human beings so much that God became one of us through the Son, Jesus, to give his life to bring new life for all. How amazing, that God did all this so that we who believe in Jesus have assurance that we can share in the Lord's glory on earth and in heaven. As David Peterson comments on this passage "The Son had to share our humanity, to suffer and die, so that we might share in His glory." People matter to God.

At the start of this year's Challenge Poverty Week, it is appropriate for us to ask ourselves: How do we view people who are poor in our society, of lower social standing to us? Do we see them as made in the image of God, loved by God, with the potential to work, serve and be part of the community? Or do we hold subconscious stereotypes and prejudices.

Here in St Ives, there was a man named Chris Lake who played the guitar in front of Lloyds bank across the road. He died a little while ago and his friends were not told of his funeral so they could attend it, and they have asked for a memorial service for him. Are you comfortable with us leading a service for him and allowing his friends, some of whom have drink problems to come in this worship area to remember him?

A gentleman this past week turned up at our church who has just come out of prison, found a job, and a place to live but couldn't get cheque cashed in time to pay upfront rent. Should we help him? We give a little food and refer people to the St Ives Foodbank, which is a help. But should we do more? Not an easy question. There are several times that I have helped people who asked for money, and never saw them again – I do not know if they wasted it or used to improve their situation. Yet, one of my brothers has been in that situation and was helped when he needed it most and is now in his own home with a partner and doing better.

So, are we our brother's keepers? Yes, I think we are! I know that we are not to be foolish and unwise with our resources, but if you think about the demeaning role of having to beg for help from others in our society, and if their stories are plausible and consistent, then I think we can and should help them. We never know when we could be in a tight situation and need assistance.

Jesus socialised with those on the fringes of his society – he healed the sick; fed the hungry, he ate and drank with prostitutes, he gave dignity to those who were poor. We do have a welfare system, which gives a basic minimum to live on, but it takes 5 weeks to come through. Perhaps as well as giving charitable help we should be challenging our government to better support the poor – not to take away the £20 Universal credit, not to expect the poorest to pay a greater proportion of the gas and electricity increase?

And do we care for people around the world, so many who are less well off than ourselves? What about the Afghan refugees now in our country? Places in Africa, South America, the slums of India, Asia? There are many charities set up such as Christian Aid, Tearfund, who support people in developing countries. I took the Harvest food to the foodbank last Sunday and the curate Sam was most grateful.

The Let's think of ways that we can revive the understanding of church as a community of faith that is blessed by God to be a blessing to others. In so doing we may restore the church as where people can come for their whole well-being. We can help show that church is still a positive part of society and help people learn about God's love and mercy.

For God's kingdom is different from our society where there are social and class divisions. Under the Lord's reign all people have equal value and worth, all worthy of dignity and respect. All are to share in the abundant blessings of a generous God. The biblical vision for the community of Israel under the jubilee law given through Moses, was not a strict obedience to a load of rules to ensure submission and obedience for the sake of it; it was a practical way of life, preventing the concentration of wealth and power for a few and instead allowing a sharing of God's blessings for all. The dependent poor were to be released from debt and land returned to people because God is the ultimate owner. As God is generous and giving; they were to be, too. Many years later Jesus fulfilled that law saying that he had come to give life, life in all its fullness.

So, we as Jesus followers today are to live and work in a way that reflects God's ways of justice and mercy to bring fullness of life for all people. As we do so, we might just find that the church regains its respect and value in society and perhaps more people come to the church to find peace and the fullness of life in relationship with the one true God who is the source of life. Let it be so!

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God,

We pray for the world in all its rich complexity and need. We pray for those in developing nations, giving thanks for Fairtrade and its efforts at more equal trade for small businesses. We pray for aid agencies and charities who seek to alleviate poverty and those who are homeless, refugees and asylum seekers. We pray for a more even distribution of wealth and resources.

We pray for all those affected by natural and manmade disasters: the volcano in

We pray for all those still effected by the Covid pandemic – that vaccines will be sent to poorer countries and given to as many people as possible. We pray for the NHS and its challenges to provide healthcare for all in the UK – we pray for sufficient nursing and medical staff and that they will be able to serve those with Covid and also those affected by the backlog of those with other medical conditions. We pray for those in our fellowship who are in nursing homes, hospital and shut in at home.

We pray for our own nation, where there are shortages of HGV drives affecting food and building supplies as well as petrol. We pray for our leaders that they will be wise and sensible and honest and fair as they decide policies.

We pray for our neighbourhood, those who are homeless, those who need to use the foodbank, those needing friendship and support. Lord guide us as a church as we

are opening our doors once again, to know how we may best serve you and our community. Bless us and make us a blessing to others we pray, in Jesus' name.