

URC Daily Devotions Worship for Sunday 16th August 2020

Welcome to worship for 16th August. Today's service is led by the Rev'd Lythan Nevard, minister for Cranbrook - I work for the Methodist Church, the United Reformed Church and the Church of England building church and community in the new town of Cranbrook, which is still being constructed on the edge of Exeter. I work from the untidy end of the study I share with Phil who is also a URC minister. Cornerstone Church does not have its own building so most Sundays outside of lockdown involve an early start creating a worshipping environment for Cornerstone Church in our wonderful Church of England primary school St Martins. But we might be doing Forest Church or sharing breakfast and reflections in a house after helping to marshal at the town's Junior Park Run. Whether you are at home alone, in the garden with birds singing or on a carefully managed holiday – we are the gathered family of God, and can lift our voices together in worship.

Call to Worship

One: To all who are imprisoned,	Many: God says, "Come out."
One: To all who are living in darkness,	Many: God says, "Show yourselves"
One: To all who hunger and thirst,	Many: God gives food and springs of water.
One: To all who are far away,	Many: God makes smooth the way home. God will not forget us, we are inscribed on the palms of His hands.

Hymn

Praise to the Lord,
the Almighty,
the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him,
for he is your
health and salvation!
Come all who hear! Now to his
altar draw near,
joining in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord,
who shall prosper our work
and defend us;
Surely His goodness
and mercy shall daily attend us.
Ponder anew
what the Almighty can do
when with His love
He befriends us

Praise to the Lord!
O let all that is in me adore Him!
All that has life and breath,
come now with praises before Him!
Let the Amen sound from His people again,
Now as we worship before Him!

Joachim Neander (1650 – 1680) translated by Catherine Winkworth (1827-78)

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness

O God we praise you! **With body, mind and soul we praise your holy name**

We thank you for all that you have given to us
For our health, For our ability to worship and adore you

O God we praise you! **With body, mind and soul we praise your holy name**

We thank you that you are Lord of all
And yet are ready to gently shelter us under your wings
For the way that you give us everything that we need

O God we praise you! **With body, mind and soul we praise your holy name**

We thank you that you work in all things for good.
 You fill our lives with goodness and mercy
 We spend a moment in quiet, with hearts overflowing with love
 as we thank you for the blessings you have given us this week
 our friend indeed
 O God we praise you! **With body, mind and soul we praise your holy name**

And yet, despite our declarations of love and praise we know that we also need to come asking for forgiveness for there are things we have done, things we have said, that we wish we had not
 Ways in which we have let you down that weigh heavy on our hearts.

And so, we bring them to you now

We are truly sorry and ask to be forgiven.

And the good news is that through Jesus Christ you offer us new life. Jesus says "you are forgiven"
 and calls us again to walk in his way. O God your love overwhelms us may we live our days in
 thanks and praise. Amen! Amen! Amen!

The Lord's Prayer

Prayer of Illumination:

As we hear your Word Lord Jesus may we enter into the story and walk with you

As we reflect on your Word Lord Jesus may your Holy Spirit inspire and challenge us

As we act on your Word Lord Jesus; enable us to manifest your love in our actions and our speech

So that we truly walk in your way. Amen

Reading St Matthew 15:10-28

Hymn:

REFRAIN: *Send down the fire of your justice,
 send down the rains of your love;
 come, send down the Spirit,
 breathe life in your people,
 and we shall be people of God.*

Call us to be your compassion,
 teach us the song of your love;
 give us hearts that sing,
 give us deeds that ring,
 make us ring
 with the song of your love.

3: Call us to answer oppression,
 teach us the fire of your truth;
 give us righteous souls,
 'til your justice rolls,
 make us burn
 with the fire of your love.

2: Call us to learn of your mercy,
 teach us the way of your peace;
 give us hearts that feel,
 give us hands that heal,
 make us walk
 in the way of your peace.

4: Call us to witness your Kingdom,
 give us the presence of Christ;
 May your holy light
 Keep us shining bright,
 Ever shine
 with the presence of Christ.

Marty Haugen © 1989, GIA Publications, Inc

Sermon

Are you sitting comfortably? That's the way Listen with Mother would start on the radio. Bliss for me as a child as I would snuggle in for a cosy story. Bliss for my mother as she would get 10 minutes peace...

So, are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin. Make sure you are comfortable now as you may not be later. Because this isn't a cosy story. This may involve some wriggling, some niggling and some downright uncomfortable feelings. Not 10 minutes of peace at all. But if you can, stay with me. Here's the thing. I had a plan for this sermon. It involved opening with a not really that funny joke about a baptism for a dog and a few mentions of what the Greek words used actually mean. And then two things happened. Followed by a third. The first thing was the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis – a black man killed by a police officer in an horrific manner. In the outpouring of anger and outrage that followed I started to listen to what black people are dealing with. I thought I had listened before. I thought I was a good advocate. I now know I was wrong.

The second thing was learning about a method of Bible Study advocated by Fresh Expressions called "Discovery" where the first question you ask is "If the story happened today what would it look like?" And I sat and imagined what it would look like. I visualised a black woman facing up to Jesus and telling it to him straight. And the story became real and fresh in a different way. And I tore up my notes and realised I was going to have to have a rethink. Which brings me to my third thing. I remembered that the last time I had to totally rewrite a sermon because current events broke into the Lectionary was in fact the last time I preached about this very same passage. It was August 2011 – when riots happened all across the UK following the death of Mark Duggan, a black man killed by police officers at Broadwater Farm. I don't believe in coincidences. I believe that when things come together like this, the Holy Spirit is at work. And yet I still cried out to God "Lord, isn't this passage hard enough without putting racism front and centre?" And I sense a reply to my prayer: "What did you think it is about?" What is it about?

A woman approaches Jesus. A non-Jewish woman. She cries out for help, "have pity my daughter is tormented by spirits". Jesus ignores her. She persists, following and calling out so much that the disciples ask Jesus to send that woman away. (Why couldn't they have talked to her?) Jesus dismisses her "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel." She falls at his feet. She pleads. And then Jesus says the most difficult to figure out sentence of his ministry - "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She gives a smart comeback 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' and Jesus says "you've got great faith" (the Greek is more like "MEGA faith") and her daughter is healed.

Why does Jesus react like this, this is poles apart from what happened with the centurion and his servant – which comes much earlier on in Matthew's gospel
Is it because she is a woman? Is it because she is not Jewish? Is he making a joke? Is he tired and irritable? Is he trying to get the disciples to intervene? Is he being sarcastic? Is he wrong – and the woman changes his mind? It's even more of a puzzle when you look at the first part of today's reading. Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand! It is not what goes into your mouth that makes you ritually unclean; rather, what comes out of it makes you unclean." Which offends the Pharisees. Yet the very next thing you hear Jesus say is something that the Pharisees would approve of but surely would leave Jesus ritually unclean by his standards. The way Jesus behaves here to start with leaves me cold. This is not the Jesus I love. But he – eventually – listens. He allows himself to be challenged. He is changed. And he acts. There is never such an encounter again. You can - and I probably have in the past – explain this away with Jesus making a joke about dogs (not the one I was going to use but also not really funny). I think that theory diminishes Jesus. If we believe in an incarnate Jesus, both fully human as well as divine then surely, he can sometimes be tripped up by his privilege. Whether it was because it was a request from a woman or a non-Jew or both, just for a moment he acts in a very human way. He doesn't see a person, just a problem.

This woman filled with love for her daughter and desperately worried, persists. And his eyes and heart are opened. Are you sitting comfortably now? No? Good. Neither am I.
"If the story happened today what would it look like?"
I see a black woman making a lot of noise, running after Jesus, throwing herself at his feet.

I see myself like one of the disciples muttering about fuss and hoping she would go away. I'm so glad she is not listening to me. The Discovery Bible Story method also asks "what is the story showing me?" That is a question for you to ask yourself later. I think it is showing me that there is always capacity to change my mind and see things from a new perspective. I think it is showing me that sometimes this feels very uncomfortable. Our ways of understanding how the world works are hard wired into us and it is all too easy to go back to a default position as Jesus does here. But I think I need to sit in that discomfort. To think about whether I am feeling frailty. I think the Holy Spirit is using this feeling to help me to really see. To open my eyes and heart and become aware of my own privilege and how that can cast a shadow over others. I've approached this from the perspective of a white woman because that is what I am. To those of you who are black, I say – I'm sorry you sometimes have to shout to be heard. I hear you and I am ready to listen more. Challenge me. To those of you of other ethnicities - I say the same.

I hope that for those who are white like me, you are ready to also think carefully about where we are in this story and be ready to listen. And to act. To find out more of what white privilege is all about and work for justice. It's not comfortable. It's not easy. But it is kingdom work. Stay with this story today if you can. Ask what is it showing me? And one last question – could this story make a difference to my life? This is a rare time when Jesus is not the hero. Instead it is the woman of mega faith. And how awesome it is that a foreign woman– can dare to approach, can dare to question, can dare to challenge and still be accepted in the kingdom – given a radical welcome.

Hymn:

Inspired by love and anger, disturbed by need and pain,
informed of God's own bias, we ponder once again:
"How long must some folk suffer? How long can few folk mind?
How long dare vain self-interest turn prayer and pity blind?"

From those forever victims of heartless human greed,
their cruel plight composes a litany of need:
"Where are the fruits of justice? Where are the signs of peace?
When is the day when prisoners and dreams find their release?"

From those forever shackled to what their wealth can buy,
the fear of lost advantage provokes the bitter cry:
"Don't query our position! Don't criticise our wealth!
Don't mention those exploited by politics and stealth!"

To God, who through the prophets proclaimed a different age,
we offer earth's indifference, its agony and rage:
"When will the wrongs be righted? When will the Kingdom come?
When will the world be generous to all instead of some?"

God asks, "Who will go for me? Who will extend my reach?
And who, when few will listen, will prophesy and preach?
And who, when few bid welcome, will offer all they know?
And who, when few dare follow, will walk the road I show?"

Amused in someone's kitchen, asleep in someone's boat,
attuned to what the ancients exposed, proclaimed and wrote,
A saviour without safety, a tradesman without tools
has come to tip the balance with fishermen and fools.

Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God, creator of all, whose word sustains the life of humanity, and directs our history. God is our life.

We believe in God's Son, born amongst the poor, light in our night, first-born from the dead. He is alive.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, who gives birth to the new life of God, who breathes life into the struggle for justice, who leads us to hope, who is a living force. We believe in the holy universal Church, herald of the Good News which frees people and brings new life.

We believe in the coming of a new world where Jesus Christ, our Lord, will be all in all. Amen.

Offertory

It is time to take up our offering. We give in different ways, through our actions as well as our money. This may at the moment mean being less active and staying at home. It may mean taking up new challenges or picking up the pieces of old ones to support your church and community. All are valued. Offerings are also about sharing what we have in terms of our financial resources – to charity and to our local church in whatever way we choose to give, it's important to continue - to offer our money and ourselves to God. So, let us pray together

Lord Jesus, Take my life, my voice, my whole self, take my money, my mind and my love all given whole heartedly to you.

Bless them, use them, enable us to be sharers of your good news that all are welcome in your love. Amen

Intercessions

Welcoming God, we bring our prayers for those who are the outsiders in our society. We pray for those in poverty, living on the crumbs and scraps of others' riches. We pray for those who are denied the basics of living, food and water, shelter, housing or healthcare. We pray for those who have no place of safety, for refugees and asylum seekers who have no home to call their own.

God of the outsider, we pray that you will bring healing and welcome to all. Listening God, we bring our prayers for those who are denied a voice. We pray for those whose voices are silenced by the denial of human rights and freedom of speech. We pray for all those who are prisoners of conscience, suffering because they have taken a stand for justice and freedom. We pray for those who are excluded and pushed aside, mocked, insulted or abused for their race, gender or sexuality.

God of the voiceless, we pray that you will give power and hope to all. Faithful God, we bring our prayers for all those who struggle with faith. We pray for those for whom faith is lifeless, stifled by rules and regulations. We pray for those for cry out in desperation, feeling that their prayers are unanswered. We pray for those who feel unwelcome at your table, excluded by their own weakness or the prejudice of others.

God of the gospel, we pray that you will give living, life-changing faith to all. In the name of the Christ who brings welcome, hope and change, we pray. Amen

Hymn

And can it be that I should gain
 an int'rest in the Saviour's blood?
 Died He for me,
 who caused His pain —
 for me, who Him
 to death pursued?
 Amazing love! How can it be,
 that Thou, my God,
 shouldst die for me?

He left His Father's
 throne above —
 so free, so infinite His grace —
 emptied Himself of all but love,
 and bled for Adam's helpless race:
 'tis mercy all,
 immense and free,
 for, O my God,
 it found out me!

'Tis myst'ry all:
 th' Immortal dies:
 who can explore
 His strange design?
 In vain the firstborn seraph tries
 to sound the depths of love divine.
 'tis mercy all!
 Let earth adore,
 let angel minds
 inquire no more.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
 fast bound in sin
 and nature's night;
 Thine eye diffused
 a quick'ning ray — I woke,
 the dungeon flamed with light;
 my chains fell off,
 my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth,
 and followed Thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
 Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
 alive in Him, my living Head,
 and clothed in righteousness divine,
 bold I approach th' eternal throne,
 and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Charles Wesley

Blessing

We go now into whatever experiences the week will bring always prepared to hear the Word of God even when it challenges us from unexpected sources, ready to offer a welcome to all, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us all, evermore. Amen

Sources

Call to Worship from Feasting on the Word Year A. Affirmation of Faith from the Reformed Church of France. All other liturgical material by Lythan Nevard.

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation by Joachim Neander translated by Catherine Winkworth performed by the OCP Session choir.

Send Down the Fire of Your Justice by Marty Haugen © 1989 GIA Publications. Unknown performer at St. Paul's United Church of Christ in St. Paul, MN.

Inspired by Love and Anger written by John L Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community © WGRWG performed by Stephanie Hollenberg and Luke Concannon.

And Can It Be by Charles Wesley performed by Maddy Prior and the Carnival Band.

Organ Pieces Opening: Nun Komm Der Heiden Heiland ("Now the Gentile saviour comes") by Johann Sebastian Bach (organ of The Spire Church, Farnham – 2020). Closing Songs of Praise Toccata by Robert Prizeman (organ of St Andrew's, Farnham – 2019) Both played by Brian

Cotterill. <http://briancotterill.webs.com>

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