

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and The Bridgwater Drive Church. We start with words from today's lectionary psalm – Psalm 17, described as a prayer for deliverance from persecutors, read by Margaret:

Call to worship – Psalm 17:1-7, 15

Hear a just cause, O LORD; attend to my cry;
give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.
² From you let my vindication come;
let your eyes see the right.
³ If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress.
⁴ As for what others do, by the word of your lips
I have avoided the ways of the violent.
⁵ My steps have held fast to your paths;
my feet have not slipped.
⁶ I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
incline your ear to me, hear my words.
⁷ Wondrously show your steadfast love,
O saviour of those who seek refuge
from their adversaries at your right hand.
¹⁵ As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

Holy One, let us behold your face in righteousness and your Spirit among us.
Let us hold fast to your path.
Help us to avoid the ways of violence and speak out in peace.
Let our words be those of truth and justice, giving voice to those who are silenced.
And now O God, be with us as we listen for your word. Lend ear to our songs of praise!

Hymn God of Freedom sung by the choir of Shrewsbury URC, by permission

God of freedom, God of Justice,
God whose love is strong as death,
Christ who saw the dark of prison,
Christ who knew the price of faith:
touch our world of sad oppression
with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror,
you whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest,
you who shed both tears and blood;
move in us the power of pity
to pursue the common good.

Make in us a captive conscience
quick to hear, to act, to plead;
make us truly sisters, brothers
of whatever race or creed –
teach us to be fully human,
open to each other's need.

Opening prayer

Eternal Storyteller, our hearts have become dulled to the power of your liberating good news and numb to the ways it has been used to oppress.

When we hear the story of Joseph, we are Joseph rather than the brothers who sold him into slavery.

When we hear the Passover story, we see ourselves as Israelites, never Egyptians.

When we hear the story of feeding the five thousand, we are the boy who gave Jesus his lunch, rather than the disciples who wanted the people to fend for themselves.

Eternal Hope of the oppressed, open our hearts and minds that we may see ourselves not just as the heroes of these stories but also in those who acted out of fear, hypocrisy, and hatred.

Forgive us, Holy One, for being blind to the ways we have subverted your good news.

The Holy One forgives us and gives us fresh courage to proclaim the good news that the three hounds of hell -- fear, hypocrisy, and hatred – no longer have dominion over us. **Amen**

May we leave the land of silence,
May we bring truth to voice,
May hope be ours in every step,
May healing flow in every word,
May others stand with us in grace,
May God grant us peace. **Amen**

Offertory. Please remember that both our churches are struggling with very limited income and so please consider making a donation by monthly standing order if you can, or send a donation by cheque. That these gifts may be to the service of God working with who and where we are. **Amen**

Bible reading: Romans 9:1-5

I have a small confession to make – I couldn't get very excited about today's reading from Romans. The only phrase I did get excited about was the first one – 'I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying: my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit.' I always try to tell the truth. I hope we all do apart from the occasional white lie to protect someone else from feeling bad or stupid – but that is a windy path of a tangent we are not going to go down today! But these words of Paul, I am speaking the truth in Christ, seems to be about something much deeper and stronger than simply telling the truth most of the time.

We hear a lot, especially from social activists and dramatic preachers about 'speaking truth to power' but here's another confession – I didn't really know what that meant or where the phrase came from, so you guessed it, I looked it up on the internet.

Apparently, speaking truth to power is a non-violent political tactic, employed by dissidents against the received wisdom or propaganda of governments they regard as oppressive or authoritarian, for example speaking out against apartheid. It originated in a Pendle Hill leaflet seeking alternatives to violence, in 1955. Pendle Hill is a Quaker retreat and study centre in Pennsylvania. It is also the title of a global human rights initiative. And the title of this book that was part of that initiative telling the stories of various human rights campaigners.

Practitioners who have campaigned for a more just and truthful world have included Nelson Mandela, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Mahatma Gandhi and the Dalai Lama – all people you will notice who lived under oppressive regimes. So, what has that got to do with us, you might say, we don't live under an oppressive regime. But there can be more subtle ways to be oppressed, as we shall hear later and as Christians, I think we should speak out against all forms of oppression, whether they affect us directly or not. People, for the most part, are currently, and have been since the start of lockdown, carrying out selfless acts of kindness to protect others. We do not wear masks because they protect us, but because they protect others. The young, fit and healthy did not stay at home for weeks because they were worried about catching the virus, but to protect the elderly and preserve the NHS. Should we not also, at Paul says, speak the truth in Christ, speak truth to power, when we see others abused or ridiculed for being black or Asian, Jewish or with special needs,

disabled or non-binary whatever that really means – we don't need to understand it, or even agree with it, but we do need to speak out when we see or hear abusive language or behaviour.

The URC is sometimes described as a church which is too 'nice'. We were founded on unity, and our goal is to keep on uniting with more and more denominations. We live for unity and reconciliation. We agree things by committee, by discernment. But, being nice and conciliatory is not always the best policy - 'haven't we all [at times] seen someone treated unfairly yet kept silent to avoid being disagreeable? Haven't we all swallowed our words just to keep the peace? Haven't we all accused those who fight for their rights of rocking the boat?' (*Humankind* Rutger Bregman) I'm not saying we should lose our tempers over the slightest thing, but what's that bumper sticker – if you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem – or "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." Or as Desmond Tutu said, "if you are neutral in situations of injustice you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Jesus was never neutral. Jesus was always on the side of the poor, the marginalised, the sick. As we shall see later, it seems that the crowd that he fed from the loaves and fish were probably mostly sick and marginalised. Jesus does not keep quiet when he sees things he thinks are not right. One of the most well-known stories of Jesus kicking up a fuss, is when he drove out of the temple the money-changers and sellers of doves, but what we tend to focus very little on are the verses which follow – 'the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them' (Matt 21:14) and children were there too. These were all groups who were not usually allowed to enter the temple and who were excluded from making sacrifices. Jesus and his disciples have invited them in. They have broken the rules of the Temple, which was an agent of the oppressive Roman empire, and invited in the undesirables and cured them and given them a voice.

So, let us speak the truth of Christ, and speak it to power. And if you are too shy to speak out loud, why not let a T-shirt or a bag, or a face mask with a message, speak for you...

Show T-shirts – Choose Love, No Human is Illegal, Some People Are Gay, Get Over It.

Hymn Inspired by love and anger

From Church Hymnary, © WGRG, The Iona Community

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 for ever shackled
to what their wealth can buy,
the fear of lost advantage
provoked the bitter cry,
'Don't' query your position!
Don't criticise your wealth!
Don't mention those exploited
by politics and stealth!

From those for ever 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?'

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?'

Bible reading: Matthew 14:13-21

The feeding of the 5000 – we've heard this story hundreds of times, haven't we? What new is there to say about this story? We know we need to share what we have, even if it isn't very much. We know that with God's generosity, there is always more than enough – there were baskets of food left over after everyone had eaten. What else can be said? That it what I thought; so I was just going to focus on our other passage for today from Romans. But then, I found that this story is included in *Untold Stories, Scripture from the margins*, produced by Christians against Poverty. And that the reflection is written by Ruth Wilde, the National Coordinator for Inclusive Church who will be speaking with us later in the year.

Here is what Ruth has to say about the story – it does bring something a bit new and different: This story is one of the very few stories present in all four Gospels, and an alternative version of it – the feeding of the 4,000 – is also present in two Gospels, including in Matthew (15:32–39). This means that the story appears six times in four Gospels. There is something very important and significant about the story therefore, which we should pay attention to. The numbers used in the story are symbolic: in Matthew chapter 14, there are 12 baskets left over (one for each of the disciples and tribes of Israel); and there are five loaves of bread (one for each book of the Torah). Matthew is not the only Gospel to use these numbers in the story, either. John's version, for example, has the exact same numbers. In Matthew's other similar story in chapter 15, the numbers change slightly: now there are seven loaves of bread and seven baskets left over (seven is also a symbolic number in the scriptures – the number denoting the completion of God's plans). Apart from the interesting numbers, the detail is lacking in the Matthew versions. We can however visit the story in John's Gospel to find out more. In John chapter 6, it says that the sea from which Jesus came 'ashore' was the Sea of Galilee, alternatively called the Sea of Tiberias. This sea was next to an unclean city – Tiberias, a 'necropolis' or city of the dead. This, coupled with another interesting detail – that the Passover was happening, meant that these people making up the large crowd were probably 'unclean' and marginalised themselves. Respectable people would have ordinarily been attending Passover in Jerusalem and would not have been anywhere near an unclean sea. Indeed, the story says that the people following Jesus were "sick", which meant that they were likely outcast in the society of the day. Just like poor people, sick and disabled people were on the margins of society. They often still are, even today. The readers in Jesus' time would have understood this detail in the story, so we too must understand and read it in this light. The feeding of the multitude is a story of solidarity, healing and sharing among the most marginalised of people. Jesus chose to be with this particular group, rather than either on his own (as he had originally planned) or at the Passover with other respectable Jews. We too are called to be in solidarity with the marginalised, whether we are ourselves on the edges of society or not.

Each story in this series comes with a fact and a call to action.

As of the beginning of 2019, 17,000 disabled people have died waiting for benefits payments since 2013, affected by cuts and changes to welfare and specifically personal independence payments

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 2 August 2020

(PIP). Now, Hundreds of thousands of sickness and disability benefit claimants are facing delays in receiving support as government staff are diverted from processing claims to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. Unwell and vulnerable people who have submitted claims for support or are trying to appeal a decision to cut their entitlement are struggling financially as they wait months for a response from the Department for Work and Pensions. Many have died or taken their own lives in desperation while waiting.

What can we do to raise awareness of this situation and take action? What can we do to speak the truth of Christ and stand in solidarity with the most marginalised in society?

Hymn Sent by the Lord am I

Sent by the Lord am I;
my hands are ready now
to make the earth the place
in which the kingdom comes.
Sent by the Lord am I;
my hands are ready now
to make the earth the place
in which the kingdom comes.

The angels cannot change
a world of hurt and pain
into a world of love,
of justice and of peace.
The task is mine to do,
to set it really free.
Oh, help me to obey,
help me to do your will.

Prayers of intercession led by Jean

O God our heavenly Father, as we come to you in prayer we give you thanks that although we are not together physically we are together in spirit.

We give you thanks for our Queen – her example and wisdom. We pray for our government that they may be guided by your Spirit at this difficult time.

We think back over the past week and remember some of the headlines in our newspaper – or seen on the television or heard on the radio.

Let's bring one of those situations to God now in a few moments **silence**.

We pray for everyone involved.

We think of The Community, in which we live, our neighbours. A few months ago we only knew them by their car - going out - or coming in, but in these last few weeks we have got to know them better. May this friendship continue and grow. May we be sensitive to their needs.

Now that the lockdown is easing we pray for those who are anxious about going out.

God of the marginalised and oppressed, hear our prayer for all those who suffer due to callous decisions made by faceless government departments. We pray that all people may be seen as individuals not figures or statistics. Bring us closer together, that we might empathise and be in solidarity with one another and especially with those who are the poorest and most vulnerable.

Thank you that you know our needs even before we ask you.

We think of those who specially need our prayers - Those who are ill in hospital or at home, those who have been bereaved.

As we go into this new week may we sense your continued presence with us.

We ask all these prayers and the unspoken prayers of our hearts through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Let us recall how this God has walked with us.

Let us recall how this God has walked with us.
faithful through struggles, through joy and despair.
Let us rejoice in this glorious friendship –
God who has rescued us, God always there

Let us commit to God's challenging future,
risking renewal, regardless of cost.
God who expended so much for our rescue
Surely will see that no effort is lost.

Let us embrace all God offers as future,
trusting that, somehow, our way will be clear;
only this God can defend and sustain us,
guiding our footsteps and quelling our fear.

Let us depend on God's marvellous future,
though it remains largely hidden from sight;
trusting our Saviour to bring to completion
wonders untold 'til each wrong is put right.

So, let us choose to be faithful and thankful,
looking to God as our helper each day,
daily depend on the gifts of God's goodness,
giving us strength as we follow God's way!

By John Campbell, © Kevin Mayhew Ltd

Blessing

God who weeps at injustice and oppression, genocide and crucifixion:
we grieve the state of our world – so much brokenness and violence,
so much pain and unfairness.

God who aches for a different way,
a peaceable respect, a community of equals and a realm of love:
we ask for hope in order to work for change;
we ask for courage to resist in the face of opposition;
we ask for faith to believe in the possibility of peace. Amen

A blessing from the United Church of Canada