

Sunday 30 August 2020 on Zoom

Today is a 5th Sunday and before Corona hit, I was due to lead café style church at Bridgwater Drive (for the first time). So, as a one-off, and as a trial run for when we have a Zoom service and meeting with the National Coordinator of Inclusive Church in October, today we are holding our worship on Zoom. **Thora** will lead our hymns, please 'mute' yourselves then you can sing along to your hearts content at home! I have tried to pick hymns I think people will know! Several different people will lead us in readings and prayers, and we will have a time of discussion after the (short) sermon, and a time of fellowship (chatting) at the end. **If possible, please have this service printed, or handy on your computer screen.** When a response says 'people' one named person will respond out loud for all of us, but you can respond at home, muted (otherwise it will be a cacophony of misunderstanding and syncopation!) **Please have a piece of paper and pen handy too!** A couple of times, I have attended (if that's the right word) a Zoom service with the Seekers Church in Washington DC. The Seekers Church is a diverse, progressive, and affirming family of faith working for peace and justice. They celebrate and welcome people of all races, sexual orientations, gender identities, beliefs, and cultures to full participation in the church's community life, rituals, and leadership. I particularly like their focus on peace and their use of inclusive language. I have borrowed quite a bit from their liturgy for today as it seems to me to work well for the Zoom format.

Time of arrival 9.45am – time for arriving and greeting. If possible, please wave or write a greeting in the 'chat' function so that the service can start promptly at **10.00am**

Call to Worship (Seekers)

NAOMI: Jesus says, the way of heaven is like a mustard seed, like yeast, like a pearl of great price.

IAN on behalf of the **People: We come to spread the good news that the ways of God are not the ways of humans.**

NAOMI: Listen to Jesus, who tells us to give food to all who hunger.

IAN/People: We come to learn how to make feasts for thousands out of two fish and five loaves of bread.

NAOMI: Look at Jesus, calming the waves and inviting us to walk on water.

IAN/People: We come to sit at the feet of Jesus, ready to hear new meanings in ancient tales.

HYMN – The God of Abraham praise (R&S 121) based on Ex 3:14-16 omitting verses 3 & 5

1 The God of Abraham praise
who reigns enthroned above;
the ancient of eternal days
and God of love!
Jehovah, great I AM,
by earth and heaven confessed
we bow before the sacred name
for ever blessed.

2 The God of Abraham praise
at whose supreme command
from earth we rise and seek the joys
at his right hand:
we all on earth forsake
its wisdom, fame, and power;
the God of Israel we shall make
our shield and tower.

4 The God who reigns on high
the great archangels sing,
and 'Holy, holy, holy,' cry,
'Almighty King!
who was, and art the same,
and evermore shalt be;
Jehovah, Father, great I AM!
we worship thee!'

6 The whole triumphant host
give thanks to God on high:
'Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost',
they ever cry;
Hail Abraham's God and ours!
one mighty hymn we raise,
all power and majesty be yours
and endless praise!

Opening Prayer from the URC Prayer Handbook based on Romans 12:9-21

SUE/People: Dearest God, transform us, that we may love generously.

NAOMI: It is by your love that you call us together as your people, and invite us to bear your grace in all we do.

SUE/People Dearest God, transform us, that we may see your grace.

NAOMI: It is by your grace that you call us together as your people, to share your word with those we meet.

SUE/People Dearest God, transform us, that we may understand your word and play our part in the body of Christ.

NAOMI: It is by your word that you call us together, gathered to worship and sent out to serve as Christ served. **Amen**

Lighting of the Peace Candle:

Jean will light and hold up a candle, for peace in the world, for solidarity with the oppressed and in memory of those who cannot share in today's service. It will remain lit throughout the service.

Commitment (Seekers) Said by all on 'mute', led by Naomi

O Holy One, we come today to claim our relationship with you.

We pray for the commitment to grow together,
sharing the gifts you give us with others here and in the wider world.

Forgive us for the hurt we have inflicted and help us forgive those who have hurt us.

Give us strength and discipline to nurture our relationship with you;

to care for every part of your creation;

to foster justice and be in solidarity with those in need;

to work to end all war, and violence, and discord;

and to respond joyfully when you call, freely giving ourselves as you have shown the way.

We open our hearts to you and your creation in the name of Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

HYMN - Christ be Our Light (CH 543, CC Worship folder)

Longing for light, we wait in darkness
Longing for truth, we turn to You.
Make us Your own, Your holy people
Light for the world to see.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in Your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has pow'r to save us.
Make us your living voice.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in Your church gathered today.

Longing for food, many are hungry
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us Your bread, broken for others
Shared until all are fed.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in Your church gathered today.

Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the heart that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another
Making your kingdom come.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in our hearts.

Shine through the darkness.

Christ, be our light!

Shine in Your church gathered today.

Exodus 3:1-15 read by Robert

Reflection - Naomi

Remove your sandals for you are standing on holy ground. Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists all remove their shoes before entering a temple or mosque. This is not something Christians do, although I visited an Ethiopian church in Israel where people removed their shoes and also prostrated in a manner similar to Muslims. Christians generally no longer cover their heads in places of worship like Jews and some other faiths do. What do we do to show or know we are in a sacred space? Since most of us are at home, you may want to remove your shoes or slippers and consider yourself on holy ground, and ponder why we have lost any outward sign of respect when entering the house of God.

Moses hid his face. Divine presence was thought to be so intense, mysterious and powerful that it was dangerous to humans and they should not look upon it, so Moses hid his face. Since God no longer appears to humans in fire, cloud and burning bush, or we no longer see God in those things, we don't need to hide our faces, though we have been forced by a virus to do so in places of worship. Today, most of us have the freedom to be in a hallowed space, here online free of a face-covering. Do we consider this a hallowed, holy space? The Seekers clearly do, as you will hear in the final blessing, they think of even this virtual space as holy, presumably because we are meeting in the presence of God even though we are not all together in one sanctified building. Perhaps later people would like to comment on whether you think this space is holy or not, and what makes a space holy? Maybe you could hold up a piece of paper saying 'holy' or 'not holy' after our second reading and reflection and we can see what people think!

I am who I am. Say to the Israelites, 'I AM' has sent me.

What's in a name? I must confess that I get a bit fed up with the need that many younger people seem to have to name everything. My favourite pet peeves are flexitarian – a person who is not a vegetarian, nor eats meat every day, but eats a mix of things – why do we need a special name for that, surely that is what most people do, isn't it?! Or 'self-care' – that's just taking care of yourself, which people have been doing for centuries, why do we need a new term for it? Although I will grant you that self-care is shorter and snappier! There was a bit of a discussion recently on Facebook about non-trans people not liking to be called 'cis'. To me that seems redundant, cis is the default or normal and trans is the person that is different. But then I got to thinking that in other situations, that default thinking could be offensive. If most people are white, it doesn't seem like you need to specify that you are white, but how does that make black or Asian people feel? Especially when they usually are referred to by the colour of their skin? I would probably never refer to myself as able-bodied, but how do disabled people feel when they are not considered to be the default and are defined by their disability?

It struck me as odd that the first thing Moses says to God is 'who am I' that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt? Asking about his own identity and validity. And the second thing he says is if the people ask who sent me, what shall I say to them? Asking about God's identity. Why would that

be the first thing the Israelites would ask? You'd think they would just be pleased that someone, anyone, was taking them out of slavery, why would they care what his name was? Here is another instance of when you really need to know the context to be able to fully understand a Bible text, as we were saying at Bridgwater on Tuesday – at this point in the history of the Israelites, they do not yet have a monotheistic god. They live in a polytheistic world and so gods were known by their proper name, not by the generic term 'god'. Moses needs to know which deity is calling him. First God says, 'I am who I am', then that is shortened to 'I am', then in verse 15 the LORD. In Hebrew this is YHWH, the name considered too holy to say out loud, so Jews tend to say Adonai, 'my lord' instead, or 'hashem' which literally means 'the name'. All three names come from a root meaning 'to be', so the name of God is verbal rather than a noun. God simply 'IS'. God cannot be defined or contained by a name. But in case Moses is in any doubt, God gives his name and description – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob the great patriarchs of the Israelites. So, as tiresome as it may sometimes be, naming things is important. We need names to know who someone is and how we stand in relationship with them. When so many people use male pronouns as a shorthand for God, it is good to remember that God calls God, 'I Am'.

Romans 12:9-21 read by Keith

Reflection - Naomi

Paul continues his discourse on holy living that we started last week with a section on living in harmony in the community. We are to bless those who persecute us, not return evil for evil, and as far as it is possible live peaceably with all.

We had a discussion related to this in the house groups, Bible Study and at Bridgwater this week in talking about the passage from Matthew 5 when Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek and walk the extra mile, and in relation to the end of Luke 6, after the Beatitudes when we are told to love our enemies and again told to bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you. These passages are often given as arguments for being a pacifist. And it is true that Jesus never uses violence. The one time he is angry in the Temple, he lashes out at tables and coins, not at people. But this is not a call to be passive in the face of oppression or abuse against yourself or others.

Jesus suggests a third way, a path between submission and violence, a kind of active non-violence as used by Gandhi. It turns out that both turning the other cheek and walking the extra mile are not signs of submission, but of defiance. I won't reiterate the details for those of us who discussed it earlier in the week, but both were ways of pulling up short the abuser and embarrassing them.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul expands on the words of Jesus. If enemies are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty give them something to drink – show that you are better than them. The phrase to heap burning coals on their heads means to make them feel embarrassed or remorseful, so you overcome evil with good. Shame is unique to humans. We are the only creatures that blush and feel shame, and it has from the earliest times of humanity been used as the mechanism to stop or dissuade people from doing things that harm the community. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors kept

people equal and humble through shame. This is probably in part where the commandment against idolatry came from – we must not put ourselves or anything above God; that keeps us humble. And some say that the Garden of Eden story, was about humans wanting to be like God, to have all the knowledge, to be above themselves, that was the ‘sin’ more than simple disobedience.

Paul tells the people not to be haughty, not to put themselves above others but to associate with the lowly. The word lowly, usually means humble or oppressed, rather than low status or poor. That is how communities can live in peace – identify with the marginalised rather than the powerful; do not claim to be wiser or better than you are, do not seek vengeance for that is God’s domain. But we are not to passively accept mistreatment, but instead to defy it peacefully by overcoming evil with good, by embarrassing those who abuse us and heaping burning coals on their heads.

Responses/Discussion

HYMN – Make me a channel of your peace (R&S 629) based on Romans 12:9-21

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there is hatred, let me bring Your love
Where there is injury, Your pardon Lord
And where there’s doubt, true faith in You

*Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul*

Make me a channel of Your peace
Where there’s despair in life, let me bring hope
Where there is darkness, only light
And where there’s sadness, ever joy

*Oh Master, grant that I may never seek
So much to be consoled as to console
To be understood as to understand
To be loved as to love with all my soul*

Make me a channel of Your peace
It is pardoning that we are pardoned
In giving to all men that we receive
And in dying that we’re born to eternal life

Prayers of Intercession led by Joyce

Lord God,
you reproached Peter because he had only human concerns;
but Peter just wanted to protect the one he loved.
We pray for people the world over
who find themselves in difficult situations.
We pray that they would all have someone
to care for them and lift them before you.

Pause

Merciful God, hear our prayer.

We pray for all who are persecuted for their faith:
for all who are misunderstood,
for asylum seekers who flee real danger in their homeland.
We pray for those who work tirelessly to address wrongs.

Pause

Merciful God, hear our prayer.

We pray for people whose lives don't always work out right,
through their fault, or through no fault of their own.

Pause

Merciful God, hear our prayer.

We pray for the people in our lives
who need your protection, Lord,
that we will always be faithful in prayer for them.

Pause

Merciful God, hear our prayer. Amen.

Blessing – Naomi (Seekers)

As we leave this hallowed virtual space, may the comfort we have found together become the energy we need to be expressions of hope and healing. In the name of the Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Time of fellowship/chatting

We are not quite sure how this will work, but Keith (who is hosting the Zoom meeting) will split us into 'breakout' rooms.