

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 24 January 2021. Third Sunday of Epiphany

Music to start - My life flows on in endless song https://youtu.be/1dkY_J1RYoo
online virtual choir version

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church on this the Sunday of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Call to Worship (inspired by Jonah 3:1-5 and Psalm 62)

Praise the God of all Creation.
Worship the One who calls us
speaking with a different voice,
offering an unexpected invitation.
Celebrate the presence of our loving God.
Rejoice, the realm of God is near.

For God alone is our rock and our salvation.
Trust in God at all times, O people
pour out your heart before God,
for God, the Holy One is our refuge.

HYMN Jesus calls us o'er the tumult (R&S 355) recorded by Thora

Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult
of our life's wild, restless sea,
day by day his voice is sounding,
saying, "Christian, follow me;"

as, of old, apostles heard it
by the Galilean lake,
turned from home and toil and kindred,
leaving all for his dear sake.

Jesus calls us from the worship
of the vain world's golden store;
from each idol that would keep us,
saying, "Christian, love me more."

In our joys and in our sorrows,
days of toil and hours of ease,
still he calls, in cares and pleasures,
"Christian, love me more than these."

Jesus calls us! By your mercies,
Saviour, may we hear your call,
give our hearts to thine obedience,
serve and love you best of all.

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 62, Mark 1: 14-20)

It is time to become focussed,
not on our wants or complaints but on God:
In the silent places of my soul I turn to God,
for God alone is our rock and salvation.

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the good news of God,
saying the time has come, the realm of God is at hand.
The realm of God is not very far from any one of us,
for in God we live and, move and have our being.

Jesus said: repent and believe the good news.
The time has come.
In the silent places of my soul I turn to God,
for God alone is our rock and salvation. **Amen**

Offering

You are reminded to send in your gifts for the work of the church by cheque or bank transfer.

God, whose giving knows no ending,
we offer up the treasure that you have entrusted to us;
we offer up the skills and time that you have graciously given to us;
we offer up ourselves in service and praise.

Receive these gifts by your grace.

Multiply and use them through the power of the Holy Spirit
to accomplish Christ's work of love in the world. **Amen.**

written by Joanna Harader, <http://spaciousfaith.com/>

Readings: Jonah 3:1-5
 Mark 1:14-20

Sermon

What do you remember about the story of Jonah – that he was swallowed by the whale, right?

Well, a large fish actually, but let's go with a whale. But did you know or remember that Jonah asks to be thrown into the sea? I didn't. But, I'll come back to that.

Jonah is a very interesting character; one might say a very human character in the way he changes his moods and outlook on life. The story in the book of Jonah, one of the shortest in the Bible, is also interesting. It has a quite typical beginning for a book of prophecy – 'Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah...saying, "Go at once to Nineveh and cry out against it." We don't know anything about Nineveh, except that it is a great and large city, but presumably the people at the time knew what sort of place Nineveh was. (I found out later that Nineveh was the capital of Assyria!) But to my mind, the story doesn't have a proper ending. At the end of chapter 3, God changes his mind about the destruction of the city and doesn't do it because the people have repented of their evil, violent ways. That would be a great place to end the story! Job done. Mission accomplished. Jonah finally did what God had asked him to do and it bore fruit. Then we have chapter 4 in which Jonah is angry that God saved the city. So angry that he asks God to take his life. It is not clear why Jonah is so angry and despondent to the point of wanting to die but it seems to be that he knew God wouldn't destroy the city anyway, so he is fed up that he went all that way and walked around the town telling them to repent. Presumably, he feels used by God. That all his work and effort was in vain. Well, we can all feel like that sometimes can't we – that our efforts are in vain? What's the point? What is the point of keeping the lockdown rules when others are not, or the government makes poor decisions that we have no say about? What is the point of recycling and trying to make ethical choices in life, when the governments and big corporations and billionaires do what they want and continue to destroy the planet? We can all have moments like Jonah. Except Jonah, in typical Old Testament style, has a go at God, instead of reflecting about his own reluctance to do the will of God, or the fact that sometimes stuff just happens and it's not God's fault. He even says, 'I told you so' to God, which actually he didn't according to the recorded text in chapter 1, verse 3. He didn't say anything to God, he simply ignored God's instructions and set out to flee the presence of the Lord by going to Tarshish!

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Anyway, God has to explain things to Jonah by way of an elaborate visual aid! While Jonah is sitting sulking, God creates a tree to give him shade, and Jonah is very happy. But the next day, God causes the bush to die, and Jonah gets so hot he begins to feel faint and again wishes he was dead. Now in the story, it is God that creates and then destroys the bush, but I think that is just the ancient peoples' way of explaining that stuff happens. One day you may have shade and comfort, the next day you may be suffering some sort of discomfort, in this case heat and thirst. One day you may feel happy, the next day sad, and I think that is especially so at the moment – we swing from highs to lows – the vaccination roll-out is wonderful and should eventually bring an end to the pandemic, but there is still a long wait, and every day there is more bad news about the number of people in hospital and dying. None of these highs and lows, for Jonah or for us, is God's fault – it is just life. And we must also accept our own part in it, even if that part is humanity's as a whole rather than you as an individual trying your best. If the book had gone on a bit longer and was written in the 21st century, rather than in ancient Israel, we would hopefully see Jonah reflecting on his own actions – how he initially refused God's call. How he was happy when things were going well, but then angry and low when they weren't, rather than trusting that God was with him in the good times and the bad times.

These extremes and odd actions of Jonah, like being angry enough to die because a bush had withered, are actually a literary ploy to make the point that repentance will bring results, that a prophecy of destruction is meant to educate and actually cause a change of heart and actions. So, we might think of David Attenborough and programmes like *Perfect Planet* as a modern-day Jonah – the Ninevites were supposed to be scared into changing their ways.

But let's go back to Jonah asking to be thrown into the sea, and the actual 5 verses assigned for today about Jonah's second call from God, when he does what he is told although still half-heartedly! Despite all his flaws, despite apparently be an angry and mixed-up young man, Jonah does a selfless act – he saves the sailors. When they ask what they should do to calm the storm, he says, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' Jonah accepts his responsibility. His part in what has happened, and because of that, God saves him by providing the fish to swallow him. Once Jonah is back on dry land, God asks him again to take the message to Nineveh and he does, and immediately 'the people of Nineveh believed God.' Now, let's compare that to our gospel reading from Mark. Jesus, in some ways, doing something similar to Jonah (although without the initial rejection of God and the bad mood and fits of anger!); he is going through Galilee saying, repent and believe the good news. He goes to the fishermen and calls to Simon and Andrew, James and John and as soon as he calls them, immediately they leave their nets and follow him. They just drop everything and leave their families and livelihoods to follow Jesus, a bit like Nathanael had a sudden change of heart last week and believed Jesus was the Son of God. Clearly Jesus is a prophet of a completely different order from those who have gone before. He is

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not reluctant or insipid. He says very few words at this point – I saw you under the fig tree – I will make you fish for people, both rather strange phrases, and people drop everything and follow him. Mark's gospel is known for being short on description and very much to the point, but the very first line of the gospel tells us Jesus is the Son of God, and the rest of the gospel sets out to prove it. As we shall see as we continue in Mark next week – now there's a cliff-hanger for you!

HYMN Lord you have come to the seashore recorded by Thora

1. Lord, you have come to the seashore,
neither searching for
the rich nor the wise,
desiring only that I should follow.

*O, Lord, with your eyes set upon me,
gently smiling, you have spoken my name;
all I longed for I have
found by the water,
at your side, I will seek other shores.*

2. Lord, see my goods, my possessions;
in my boat you find no power, no wealth.
Will you accept, then,
my nets and labour?

3. Lord, take my hands and direct them.
Help me spend myself
in seeking the lost,
returning love for the love you gave me.

4. Lord, as I drift on the waters,
be the resting place
of my restless heart,
my life's companion,
my friend and refuge.

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Prayers of Intercession

At the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity we use prayers for unity from this year's Churches Together material. Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, you create and re-create the Church in all places. Come and whisper in our hearts the prayer which Jesus addressed to his Father on the eve of his passion: "that they may all be one... so that the world may believe".

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, light the fire of your love in us so that suspicions and misunderstanding cease in the Church. May the walls that separate us fall.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy Spirit, Consoler of all, open our hearts to forgiveness and reconciliation and bring us back to you when we lose our way.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, give us poverty of spirit so that we may be open to your grace.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy Spirit, you never abandon the men, women and children who are persecuted for their faithfulness to the gospel. Give them strength and courage, and support those who help them.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

God of life, you have created everyone in your image and likeness. We sing your praise for the gift of our many cultures and traditions. Grant us the courage to stand against injustice and prejudice.

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Merciful God, you have shown us in Christ that we are one in you. Teach us to use this gift in the world so that believers of all faiths in every country may be able to listen to each other and live in peace.

O Jesus, you came into the world and shared fully in our humanity. You know the hardships of life for people who suffer in so many different ways. May the Spirit of compassion move us to share our time, gifts and resources with all those in need.

Holy Spirit, you hear the fury of your wounded creation and the cries of those already suffering from climate change. Guide us toward new ways of living that are in harmony with all creation.

God of peace, God of love, in you is our hope! Amen

Lord's Prayer

HYMN Will you come and follow me (R&S 558) recorded by Thora

Will you come and follow me
If I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
And never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
Will you let my name be known,
Will you let my life be grown
In you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide
If I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
And never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
To reshape the world around,
Through my sight and touch and sound
In you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind
If I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
And never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
Should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer
In you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true
When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
In you and you in me.

Words by John Bell and Graham Maule

Blessing – for the week of Christian Unity

Be one, so that the world may believe! Abide in God's love, go into the world and bear the fruits of this love.

May the God of all creation, fill us with all joy and all peace in faith, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Music to end:

Tu has venido at la orilla Spanish original version of *Lord, you have come to the seashore*

<https://youtu.be/OzrR-n8KJtA>

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