

Welcome to the joint worship for Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church. As today is the 5th Sunday of the month, we are going to do things a bit differently. So welcome to 'Good Morning Church!' (something a bit like Good Morning Britain – not that I've ever watched it!) I'm joined by my friend Edward who is going to help me look at the papers and read some of the post we've received. He doesn't say much, in fact he mostly listens to music, but since we can't do any outside broadcasts at the moment, I've got to work with what I've got! For those of you who can't watch online, this is Edward --

So to kick us off, some music

Hymn Praise to the Lord (R&S 74) recorded by Thora
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
come ye who hear,
brother and sisters draw near;
praise him in glad adoration!

Praise to the Lord, who o'er all things so wondrously reigneth,
bears thee on eagle's wings, and through all troubles sustaineth:
has thou not seen
all that is needful hath been
granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper they work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:
ponder anew
all the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath come now with praises before him!
Let the amen
sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him!

Prayer (inspired by Mark 1:21-28)
Un-stop our ears, O God,
that we may hear your Word proclaimed this day.
Open our minds and hearts to be changed.
Free us from the unclean spirits of worry, fear, destruction, and pride.
Teach us, Lord, that we may follow you more faithfully. Amen

Firstly, an update on a news story from last week. The children from Sandy's Zoom club have sent in these pictures of Jonah and the big fish.



Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 31 January 2021. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Jonah did get out of the tummy of the fish and is feeling fine and God decided not to destroy Nineveh so everything is now OK in that part of the world.

But we have some breaking news just in – there are reports of an apparent exorcism in a synagogue in Capernaum:

Mark 1:21-28 Message version

Then they entered Capernaum. When the Sabbath arrived, Jesus lost no time in getting to the meeting place. He spent the day there teaching. They were surprised at his teaching—so forthright, so confident—not quibbling and quoting like the religion scholars.

Suddenly, while still in the meeting place, he was interrupted by a man who was deeply disturbed and yelling out, “What business do you have here with us, Jesus? Nazarene! I know what you’re up to! You’re the Holy One of God, and you’ve come to destroy us!”

Jesus shut him up: “Quiet! Get out of him!” The afflicting spirit threw the man into spasms, protesting loudly—and got out.

Everyone there was spellbound, buzzing with curiosity. “What’s going on here? A new teaching that does what it says? He shuts up defiling, demonic spirits and tells them to get lost!” News of this travelled fast and was soon all over Galilee.

Let’s go now to a report from someone there on the ground:

I never expect excitement when I go to the synagogue – I mean, Capernaum’s not the place for it and we are all a pretty respectable bunch. There are plenty of crazy preachers around – look at that crazy John person, denouncing sins and dunking people in the river! But he wouldn’t come to our synagogue. Because who wants to be stirred up on the Sabbath? At least that’s what I always thought. To be honest, I never listen to the teaching. Why would I? Picking over bits of the law – well it doesn’t do a lot for me.

But today, there was this man, Jesus from Nazareth he was called. And everything he said seemed to speak to me. I couldn’t have drifted off. He talked as if he was speaking just to me, but everyone else got the same feeling. He made it all come alive, the scriptures, no Moses said this or according to so and so...like the scribes normally drone on about.

And then, in comes this guy, shouting and screaming – really not good and none of us knew what to do – was the man possessed? But Jesus called whatever spirit was there to come out of him...and it did!! I saw it happen!! The place was humming after that, we stood around talking for hours and anyone who wasn’t there soon came over to find out. This Jesus – I can’t get over it. I’d go anywhere to hear him again!

Sent in by our roving reporter Revd Helen Everard

Insights from a magazine article (fictious, partly inspired by an online theological commentary!)

To talk about the symptoms of convulsing and shouting strange things as an ‘unclean spirit’ is not something we do these days. And we don’t talk much about exorcisms either except in horror movies. These stories are usually interpreted as being about people who are mentally ill, or have epilepsy, for example the boy with an unclean spirit in Mark chapter 9 is said to roll on the floor and foam at the mouth. But this article points to two overarching themes in Mark’s gospel, rather than focusing on this one story of Jesus commanding a spirit to leave someone. In fact, Jesus does that several times in Mark’s Gospel. One is the general fight between good and evil and the other is the occupation of Palestine by an oppressive empire.

Both have parallels in the Star Wars story – a classic saga of good versus evil.

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 31 January 2021. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

According to a website article there is much that Star Wars can teach us about this eternal struggle, in particular five things:

1. Often the worst and most destructive evil is driven by ambition for power.
2. Good can produce evil. People who start out good, often commit violent or vengeful acts because they have been hurt or suffered a trauma themselves.
3. When good people or institutions compromise their values too much, it leaves room for evil to flourish.
4. Evil often involves people losing their humanity and becoming more like machines, like the Stormtroopers – we never see their faces, they are more like robots. Or soldiers who are trained to think of the enemy as less than fully human, so that they are able to kill them.
5. Even the noblest person may fall into darkness, but the most villainous character can come back to the light.

It says here that, within the gospel of Mark, this encounter is the first public deed of power in Jesus' ministry. The story sets up the conflict that continues through the first half of the gospel and that was displayed in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. It is the conflict between the power of evil and demons and the power of God exercised through Jesus. This cosmic conflict is reflected in the earthly realm by the struggle of Jesus with demons, the controversy between Jesus and "scribes and Pharisees," and the tension between Jesus and his "mother, sisters, and brothers" (Mark 3:31-35).

The cosmic conflict also has a social political dimension; possession by demons (legion) is parallel to occupation of the countryside by Roman power (Mark 5:1-13) The conflict is described in violent terms "have you come to destroy us?" say the demons. People who suffer the effects of being occupied or "possessed" by demons lose their ability to control their movements and their voices; either they are immobilized or compelled to move destructively (Mark 9:20-22) or they are self-destructive (Mark 5:5), much like people who live under oppressive regimes have their freedoms and mobility curtailed. Exorcism, removal of the evil spirit, by Jesus results in healing and restoration.

The community that heard Mark's gospel at the time, was powerless and poor in a country occupied by a powerful empire. The theological imagination of the victory of God's power over illness, disability, and foreign occupation was for them, lifesaving good news.

The ancient world view that attributes illness to unclean spirits that lies behind this story, although outdated medically, does dramatize forces that wreak havoc within individuals, communities, and countries today — mental illness, addiction, sexual abuse, and racial hatred. The gospel proclaims Jesus' "authority" over even the most unclean of spirits that continue to take us over.

Hymn One Sabbath day. Tune *For all the saints* (R&S 658) recorded by Thora
(Mark 1:21-38)

1. One Sabbath day, our Jesus came to share,
at synagogue, in readings and in prayer,
to show God's love to all assembled there:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

2. You taught with pow'r, with bold authority,
not like the scribes manoeuvring carefully;
you spoke for God, explaining gloriously:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

3. A man burst in, by demon-power possessed;
all gathered there were troubled and distressed.
Yet by your word, you cured him and impressed:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

5. You gave and gave, and then went out to pray,
to seek renewal at the break of day;
the cost to you was more than we can say:
our hurting healer; our God come nearer!

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Now for something completely different! There was a letter in the mail bag a few week's ago from a church in Corinth wanting to know if it was OK to eat meat which had been sacrificed in the pagan temple or not. Well, for starters, it's Veganuary, so no one should be eating any meat anyway. And before you know it, it will be Lent, so best steer clear then also. But it is an interesting question – Is eating meat in general wrong?

Does it depend how the animals have been treated? Organic, outdoor bred 'happy' animals killed painlessly are all right, but factory bred unhappy animals are not?

Does the meat need to be kosher?

Are they actually asking a deeper question about idols?

We've had a letter in reply from someone calling himself the Apostle Paul. It's a bit long, but I'm going to read it all, as he makes some interesting points.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 Message version Freedom with Responsibility

The question keeps coming up regarding meat that has been offered up to an idol: Should you attend meals where such meat is served, or not? We sometimes tend to think we know all we need to know to answer these kinds of questions—*but* sometimes our humble hearts can help us more than our proud minds. We never really know enough until we recognize that God alone knows it all.

Some people say, quite rightly, that idols have no actual existence, that there's nothing to them, that there is no God other than our one God, that no matter how many of these so-called gods are named and worshiped they still don't add up to anything but a tall story. They say—again, quite rightly—that there is only one God the Father, that everything comes from him, and that he wants us to live for him. Also, they say that there is only one Master—Jesus the Messiah—and that everything is for his sake, including us. Yes. It's true.

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 31 January 2021. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

In strict logic, then, nothing happened to the meat when it was offered up to an idol. It's just like any other meat. I know that, and you know that. But knowing isn't everything. If it becomes everything, some people end up as know-it-alls who treat others as know-nothings. Real knowledge isn't that insensitive. We need to be sensitive to the fact that we're not all at the same level of understanding in this. Some of you have spent your entire lives eating "idol meat," and are sure that there's something bad in the meat that then becomes something bad inside of you. An imagination and conscience shaped under those conditions isn't going to change overnight.

But fortunately God doesn't grade us on our diet. We're neither commended when we clean our plate nor reprimanded when we just can't stomach it. But God *does* care when you use your freedom carelessly in a way that leads a fellow believer still vulnerable to those old associations to be thrown off track.

For instance, say you flaunt your freedom by going to a banquet thrown in honour of idols, where the main course is meat sacrificed to idols. Isn't there great danger if someone still struggling over this issue, someone who looks up to you as knowledgeable and mature, sees you go into that banquet? The danger is that he will become terribly confused—maybe even to the point of getting mixed up himself in what his conscience tells him is wrong.

Christ gave up his life for that person. Wouldn't you at least be willing to give up going to dinner for him—because, as you say, it doesn't really make any difference? But it *does* make a difference if you hurt your friend terribly, risking his eternal ruin! When you hurt your friend, you hurt Christ. A free meal here and there isn't worth it at the cost of even one of these "weak ones." So, never go to these idol-tainted meals if there's any chance it will trip up one of your brothers or sisters.

So, to sum up, as someone did recently on Twitter – Stop confusing people. If in doubt, helping people is more important than what you eat. It is better to be vegetarian than to cause your friends to do something they think is a sin and will make them feel bad.

We also received a reflection on this question from the Revd Sarah Moore, Transition Champion in the National Synod of Scotland. I share with you her closing thoughts on Paul's letter. If you would like to read the whole thing, do get in touch with the show and we will post a copy out to you:

"The problem wasn't the food from the temples at all. The difficulty was how the straightforward stuff of life could get twisted and amplified to mean something never intended. Rather like a game of Chinese Whispers when what comes from the end of the line bears little or only a passing semblance to the message first given.

As we receive our faith from the generations who gave it to us and pass it on, we might take care to make sure that we aren't getting the wrong end of the stick about what is important. Or, it might be with prayer, study, reflection and discussion, we realise that someone at some point has misinterpreted part of the story of our faith. How can we prayerfully discern what is most significant to hand on and most faithful to the Good News that Jesus brought, taught, died and lived?"

Before we get to the weather, we've just got time for some prayers:

Prayers (inspired by 1 Corinthians 8:1-13)

Gracious and loving God,
we admit to you our own short-sightedness.
that we think more of ourselves than our neighbours next door,
let alone our neighbours around the world.
We get so caught up in the needs in our own lives
we forget to think about, much less pray for people we've never met.

As we try to pray for starving children in countries we cannot place on a map,
as we attempt to join in solidarity with women being sold into slavery,
as we struggle to comprehend the motivation of men who abuse or neglect their families,
the chasm between our quiet, sheltered lives
and their lives of turmoil becomes clear.

Lord of Life, may our squinting glance
across the chasm of miles, language and culture,
our desire to see your will done on earth as it is in heaven,
our prayers for our neighbours, not end with these words,
but continue day by day, moment by moment, in our actions.
May this prayer, through your grace, become for us
the way we are connected through your love with all creation.
May our prayers transform our lives.

And may all our words and deeds, be an offering to you. **Amen.**

God, Creator of life, who sees all and knows all,
we confess what you already know -
that we do not have all the answers that we so desperately long for
in order to free our world from poverty, pain and injustice.
Our desire through loving You is to
serve the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.
And so we ask, in your mercy, that you would fill us again for the work ahead.
Build us up in love that we might pour ourselves out again and again
to build what counts and lasts forever – justice, peace, and freedom.
And to make it known that you are love, and you give love,
and you require love in return. **Amen.**

The Good Morning Church weather report:

Variable. Partly sunny with heavy showers and almost certainly high winds. There is likely to be some global warming induced flooding somewhere. Feeling cold in the north.

Hymn God in Christ, Tune *What a friend we have in Jesus* (R&S 413) recorded by Thora

God in Christ, you've won us freedom,
setting each believer free;
you have conquered every demon,
that might stop me being me.
Help us live as freedom's people,
confident, alive and strong,
living freedom with your blessing,
sharing hope, resisting wrong.

Christ, you gave yourself to save us,
losing all to set us free;
so may we restrict our freedom
rather than just live for 'me'.
Like Saint Paul, help us love others,
use our freedom for their care,
freely taking love's enslavement,
live to nurture, live to share.

Daily help us self surrender,
even when we're sure we're right,
daily let us live our freedom
as a means to share delight.
Only by such mutual caring,
even when we don't agree,
can we know your fullest blessing,
can we all be truly free.

Christ Church and the Bridgwater Drive Church, 31 January 2021. Fourth Sunday of Epiphany

And before we leave you, there is just one final item of breaking news:

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York are issuing a call to the nation to pause and reflect to remember the more than 100,000 people across the UK who have died after contracting Covid-19 and all those who know and love them.

In an open letter, Archbishops Justin Welby and Stephen Cottrell invite everyone across England – whether they have faith or not – to pause, reflect on the “enormity of this pandemic” and to pray.

Archbishop Welby and Archbishop Cottrell will lead the nation in prayer for the first time **tomorrow** February 1st at 6pm. They are then asking the public to mark the passion every day at 6pm from tomorrow onwards.

Blessing

So, it's goodbye from me and it's goodbye from Edward. Until next week:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen

Hymns used under the Christ Church CCLI licence 63352