

Music to start – If ye love me, keep my commandments
sung by Ian de Massini, Downing Place URC

Call to Worship (based on Psalm 19)

The heavens are telling the glory of God
May our worship reflect God's glory.
The firmament proclaims God's handiwork.
May we see each other as the handiwork of God.
Let our prayer and praise, our singing and proclamation project the love of God.
We commune with Christians around the world,
with Christians throughout time.
With Christians across geography and across time,
Let us worship God!

from *Jesus Sets the Table*, resources by the United Church of Christ

HYMN Sing for God's glory (tune Praise to the Lord, R&S 74) recorded by Thora

Sing for God's glory that colours the dawn of creation,
racing across the sky, trailing bright clouds of elation;
sun of delight
succeeds the velvet of night,
warming the earth's exultation.

Sing for God's power that shatters the chains that would hold us,
searing the darkness of fear and despair that could blind us,
touching our shame
with love that will not lay blame,
reaching out gently to find us.

Sing for God's justice disturbing each easy illusion,
tearing down tyrants and putting our pride to confusion;
lifeblood of right,
resisting evil and slight,
offering freedom's transfusion.

Sing for God's saints who have travelled faith's journey before us,
who in our weariness give us their hope to restore us;
in them we see
the new creation to be,
spirit of love made flesh for us

© Revd Kathy Galloway (words in Church Hymnary 4)

Opening Prayer (based on Psalm 19)

Your glory, O God is declared in the holy silence of the heavens,
and told in the silent succession of day and night.
No speech, or word or voice is heard; yet they speak to all the world,
and their words reach to the ends of the earth.
The sun joyfully leaps across the sky,
from one end of the heavens to the farthest reaches,
and nothing is hidden from its heat or light.
So nothing that we do or say or whisper in our hearts
is hidden from you, Lord God.
Release us from darkness we hide deep within our lives.
Let our lives be radiant with holy fear;
delighting in your teaching,
receiving insight from your commandments

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and wisdom from your encouraging.
Enliven our desire for your everlasting judgements
over wealth or fame:
to enjoy the sweet drippings of the honeycomb,
that are to be found
in right relationship with those around us, and with you. Amen.

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Offering

You are reminded to continue to send in your gifts for the work of the church.

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/>

Reading: Psalm 19 read responsively by Helen & Robert

Reflection

'The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...the commandment of the Lord is clear.'

The Old Testament reading for today was from Exodus 20, one of the versions of the Ten Commandments, laws designed not only to keep peace and harmony between the divine and humanity, but within a community, between individuals. The law of the Lord is perfect – it ordains how creation should be sustained. Psalm 19 not only talks about the commandments of God and the benefits found in keeping them, it also tells us how nature, how the whole realm of creation praises God. Though they have no words or speech, the stars tell of the glory of God. How much more should we, who are created in God's own image, praise God's handiwork and seek to preserve and protect it?

Psalm 19 falls into three parts. The words of part one (v.1-6) recall the story of creation in Genesis, with verses 4 to 6 specifically referring to the sun. The sun is not a heavenly being, a "god" to be worshipped. No, God has created the sun and put it in its place. In the psalm writer's imagination the sun emerges each day with the freshness and happiness of a bridegroom on the first day of married life. Joyfully it runs its course, from one edge of the sky to the other, like a perpetually jubilant celestial jogger.

Verses 7 to 10 are about what Scripture can tell us. The focus moves from the world and creation to words. The spotlight is no longer on God's handiwork in space, but on created humans and speech. For the first time the name "Yahweh", LORD, is used for God. The section begins, "The law of the LORD, that is the Hebrew law, the *torah*, the first five books of the Old Testament, is perfect, reviving the soul." The psalm then fires off a series of six statements referring to God's instruction as found in Scripture. Here are several words used to designate Scripture or Torah: decrees, precepts, commandment, ordinances. These words will revive life and provide wisdom and supply joy and enlightenment. The biblical expression "fear of the Lord" refers to respect and

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trust in the Lord; the expression occurs frequently throughout the Old Testament. What are these words of the Lord's instruction worth? They are to be desired as being even more precious than fine gold.

The final verses of the psalm are a prayer for telling and teaching. You may recognise the last verse as the words many preachers pray before they deliver their sermon. Considering Psalm 19 as a whole indicates that it deals with essential themes of biblical faith. The psalm tells of nature's praise of God the Creator. It affirms trust in God the Forgiver (v. 12) and as rock-solid Redeemer (v. 14). Finally, the psalm offers an invitation to lead a life directed by God's laws and commandments, in other words, the teaching of God. As we work our way through Lent, it is good to reflect on the glory of creation and on God's commandments and how best we can keep them.

HYMN Lord, for the years (R&S 603, omit v 3) recorded by Thora

1 Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

2 Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive Your people's praise.

4 Lord, for our world when we disown and doubt you,
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

5 Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

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Reading: John 2:13-22

Reflection

This is one of my favourite passages, because it shows Jesus getting angry; showing human emotion, caring about injustice. It is not, as first appears simply about people making his Father's house a marketplace, though those are the words Jesus uses; it is about Jesus fighting inequality; overturning the tables of unfairness and abuse. For the temple was no longer about God, about prayer, about worship, about preparing for the festival of Passover, it was about buying and selling, about taking advantage of poor people who wanted to go to the temple to ask in prayer for healing, or celebrating the birth of a child or another rite of passage, for the religious leaders demanded animal sacrifices and temple taxes that had to be paid in a different currency. People had to buy a dove, an ox, a lamb to be sacrificed and most people could not afford those things.

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This story of overturning the tables in the temple comes much earlier in John than in the other gospels. In fact, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry just after his first miracle at the wedding in Cana. In the other gospels, it is the start of his Passion, an excuse for the Jewish leaders to arrest Jesus; here it is shown during one of the annual preparations of pilgrims for Passover, much as we are now preparing for Easter during Lent. The Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem, gathered in a holy place, remembering God's deliverance and seeking to honour God through rituals and repentance. Yet, rather than praising those gathered, Jesus goes into a rage. Creating his own whip, Jesus chases out the animals, sending the merchants after them. He commands the dove-sellers: "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" Why would Jesus want to stop purification and ritual - and why in such a dramatic way?

Rather than a scene of spiritual preparation, Jesus instead sees a place focused on monetary exchange. Like Old Testament prophets before him, Jesus challenges the temple economy, questioning whether it was focused more on wealth than prayer. He then goes on to use snippets of Psalm 69 to make his point. Rather than a maniac come to disrupt worship, Jesus' disciples understand him to be like the righteous sufferer of Psalm 69: one whose "zeal" for God's house and statutes made him a target for his enemies. These enemies greatly outnumber him, but he is steadfast in his reliance on God's deliverance. Praising God in song, the psalmist concludes, is more valuable than "an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs". Like Jesus, the psalmist has a different understanding of how one is to prepare for a holy day. Rituals and sacrifices should be done out of true devotion to the Lord, not be simply bought. For John, Jesus is a righteous sufferer even when, or perhaps especially when, what he does looks outrageous.

In the second part of the reading, Jesus is referring to himself as the temple of God. According to John, Jesus' body itself is the sanctuary of God's presence, not the temple in Jerusalem. This builds on the characterization from Psalm 69. Jesus is not just any righteous sufferer; he is the location of God's glory rather than the temple building in which he stands. Jesus' disruption of the worship practices, therefore, is God's own critique on the religious authorities. For John, from the very beginning of the gospel, Jesus is the embodiment of God's Word, the Word made flesh, whose dwelling with humanity enables us to see God's glory and who continues to show us the way to God. When people focus too much on a physical location, the temple, they miss out on God's glory standing right in front of them, Jesus.

As we walk the metaphorical path to Jerusalem during Lent, we join crowds of pilgrims from thousands of years preparing for Easter. But we, too, should be careful lest we miss God's earth-shattering Word in our midst. Rather than coming to a physical temple, or church building, we need instead to come to Jesus and find him where we are. Let us remember not to impose a temple tax of familiarity and the staid comfort of how things have always been, but free up our buildings to be places of welcome to all – those who can pay the tax or not, those who have come to pray and those who have come only out of curiosity.

Prayers of Intercession

Truth be told, Jesus,
There are lots of tables that need overturning in our lives;
Beneath the veneer of respectability, the tidy rows and neat regulations,
hide dark addictions and angry judgements, hungry greeds and heartless rejections

We know the pain, and so do those around us, of keeping up the facade;
What a relief it would be to have it all upset, smashed, scattered, destroyed

So, perhaps, Jesus, today you could pay us a visit and help us to radically rearrange
the furniture of our lives. **Amen.**

~ written by John van de Laar

Holy One, we pray for those who hunger, those who thirst,
those who cry out for justice, those who live under the threat of terror,
and those without a place to lay their head.
Make them hear of joy and gladness,
that those who are broken may rejoice.

We pray for those who are ill, those in pain,
those under stress, and those who are lonely.
Give them the joy of your saving help,
and sustain them with your bountiful Spirit.

In this season of Lent we pray for those who have given up so much already;
for those who have lost so much due to the pandemic,
and we pray that we all might be given the grace and strength
to repent and grow closer to you, O God.
Create in us clean hearts,
and renew a right spirit within us.

We pray for those who have died,
and who have entered into the land of eternal Light and your abiding peace.
Cast them not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from them.

Lord Jesus, it was your will that your Father's House
would be a place of prayer for all people;
help us to open our hearts and our buildings to all people
regardless of the divisions that society and culture place on us.
Grant us the strength and wisdom to be a people
consumed with prayer and zeal for you, this day and always. **Amen.**

Lord's Prayer

HYMN God is working his purpose out (R&S 573, omit v4) recorded by Thora

God is working his purpose out,
as year succeeds to year:
God is working his purpose out,
and the time is drawing near:
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

From utmost east to utmost west,
where human feet have trod,
by the voice of many messengers
goes forth the voice of God:
Give ear to me, you continents,
you islands give ear to me,
that the earth may be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

What can we do to work God's work,
to prosper and increase –
love and justice throughout the world,
the reign of the Prince of Peace?
What can we do to hasten the time,
the time that will surely be,
that the earth may be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

All we can do is nothing worth
unless God blesses the deed;
vainly we hope for the harvest-tide
till God gives life to the seed:
nearer and nearer draws the time,
the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled
with the glory of God,
as the waters cover the sea.

A Blessing for Lent

This is the wilderness time,
when every path is obscure
and thorns have grown around the words of hope.
Be the wings of our strength, O God,
in this time of wilderness waiting.

This is the time of stone, not bread,
when even the sunrise feels uncertain
and everything tastes of bitterness.
Be the wings of our strength, O God,
in this time of wilderness waiting.

This is the time of ashes and dust,
when darkness clothes our dreams
and no star shines a guiding light.
Be the wings of our strength, O God,
in this time of wilderness waiting.

This is the time of treading life,
waiting for the swells to subside
and for the chaos to clear.

A World of Blessing, ed. Geoff Duncan

Music to end, verses from Jesus Christ is waiting © WGRG, Iona Community
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSzEviUc_o

Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry too.
In the Kingdom's causes
Let me rage with you.

Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
"Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet."
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few.
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.