

Christ Church, 4 July 2021 Written service circulated to both churches

Music: Hymn to Freedom, sung by members of Downing Place URC, used with permission
<https://youtu.be/2JtyvzqqzK4>

Welcome to worship. Today we are not following the lectionary. And, in an 'if life gives you lemons, make lemonade' style, since we still cannot sing and Thora is not able to be with us today, I am making the most of the opportunity to use some music, we might not otherwise listen to, although Thora has kindly recorded a couple of hymns for us.

Just a reminder that next Sunday, I will be attending the URC General Assembly. If any of you would like to watch the Sunday worship from Assembly, details are in the News & Chat. Robert will lead an All-Age worship here at 10am and priority for places here at church will be given to families with children, please book in with Pat.

At the end of the service, after the live-stream has finished, Joyce will lead us in prayers of intercession for our church family.

Call to Worship Psalm 113

Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD.
Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised.
The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high,
who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.

Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD!

HYMN Jesus shall reign (R&S 269)

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
does his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore
till moons shall wax and wane no more.

For him shall endless prayer be made,
and praises throng to crown his head;
his name like sweet perfume shall arise
with every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue
declare his love in sweetest song,
and infant voices shall proclaim
their early blessings on his name.

Blessings abound where'er he reigns
the prisoners leaps to lose their chains,
the weary find eternal rest,
and all who suffer want are blest.

Let every creature rise and bring
peculiar honours to our King;
angels descend with songs again
and earth repeat the loud 'Amen!'

Opening Prayer (Elsa Tamez, amended)

Holy One, we are here, eager to discern your will for us and to grow in our faith. Open our minds so that we can explore new ideas and dare to dream new dreams. Open our ears to drink in the experience, wisdom and feelings of others. Open our hearts so that we can be moved in unexpected, fresh ways. God, we realise it is very easy to slip into complacency and just coast along, so we ask you to use your Word with us today to heal our wounds and trouble our hearts where we have become too comfortable. Help us to be powerful doers of your word and not just hearers only. Amen.

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The Prayer of Faith – James 5:13-18

Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.

Receive the promise of grace and the assurance of pardon – Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Your sins are forgiven for his sake. Amen

Offering

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

Holy One, receive our 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.**

I usually base my services and sermons on the lectionary, but I'm afraid I just couldn't get excited about any of the lectionary readings for today, or indeed the next couple of weeks! I'm especially glad that I will be at the General Assembly and not preaching next Sunday, as I'm not sure what I would do with the beheading of John the Baptist – good luck getting an All-Age service out of that Robert! (I'm guessing you are using something else)

So, for the two Sundays of July when I'm here at Christ Church, I'm going to look at chapter two of the Letter of James. Partly because, at the minister's Spring School in May, John Proctor gave some excellent Bible studies on the letter, but mainly because it seems to me to speak very much to the current Climate Crisis and to two of my own personal mantras:

'let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no' which actually appears in Matthew's gospel, but speaks of consistency of word and deed which is a major theme of the letter of James, and 'Be doers of the word, not merely hearers' of it (1:22) – we must take action in the world as Christians. Chapter two of the letter is only 26 verses long. Today we listen to the first 8 verses, and on the 18th we will concentrate on the second half of the chapter.

Reading: James 2:1-9

We also listen to a meditation based on the first few verses of chapter 5 of the Letter of James, in which the writer maligns the rich. The reflection was written by a working-class Chilean woman in 1973 shortly after the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. But it could also apply to current situations in the world like Syria, Israel and Gaza, or even worldwide to rich countries versus poor countries, particularly with regard to climate change.

Meditation – Rich Woman, Poor Woman from 'The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead', by Elsa Tamez

That reflection is a wonderful example of how perceptions of the same situation can be completely different, depending on one's own personal experience and the economic or social class one is

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living in. However hard we might try; we tend to judge by appearances. If we see someone in the street talking loudly to themselves and swearing, we will probably assume they are drunk, when they might well have Tourette's Syndrome or some other mental health issue. While as Christians we might be more sympathetic to the homeless than others, we may be less likely to help the ones who appear to be on drugs or alcoholic than those who sell the Big Issue and are already on a slightly higher rung. Thankfully I have never been homeless myself, but as a recent meme on social media said, we are all much closer to ending up homeless than we ever are to ending up as a billionaire. A couple of weeks ago, Claudia and I made a spur of the moment visit to Leigh on Sea. I went just as I was, in a T-shirt with moth holes and some not very clean shorts. While waiting in the queue in the Co-op, a woman looked me up and down as though I was homeless, and it wasn't a very nice experience! Is that how we think of people who are 'beneath us'? Is that how we think of poor countries who are suffering the effects of climate change? Are we like the rich woman in the story, worrying that the peasants getting richer, will mean we get poorer?

Our society, in nearly every country in the world, is set up to favour the rich more than the poor. In 2020, there were reportedly 2,095 billionaires, with an estimated total net worth of \$8 trillion. Of this amount, the top 10 wealthiest people in the world account for roughly 14% of that wealth – just 10 people (and in 2021, those 10 people are all men and all but two of them are based in the USA). Around 1% of the world's population control about 45% of the entire planet's wealth.

Even here in the UK almost a quarter of all household wealth is held by the richest 1% of the population. And during the pandemic, the rich have got richer and the poor, poorer. And yet, do we speak out about that inequality? For the most part, we do not. What have many of us been doing while stuck at home during the pandemic? – ordering things online. The owner of the Amazon, one of the richest men in the world, has got even richer, while treating his employees badly and paying far less tax than he should. And when it comes to the climate, just 20 companies worldwide account for around a third of all carbon emissions.

What does this have to do with us and the Letter of James, I hear you ask? James compels us to be doers of the Word of God, not just those who listen to it. We have a voice. We may feel sometimes, or even most of the time that we don't – that we didn't vote for the people in power and our voice is not heard. But we can speak out and according to James we have to speak out and our words and our actions have to match. They have to tie up. We are to lead by example. Do what I do, not what I say. And you will have seen in last week's News & Chat some examples of research that shows when people see their neighbours and friends taking action, like eating less meat, it encourages them to do so also.

If the letter of James were sent today to the Christian communities of certain countries in the world, especially those that suffer from exploitation, it would very possibly be intercepted by government security agencies. It would be branded subversive because of the paragraphs that vehemently denounce the exploitation by landowners and the carefree life of merchants, which in 2021 we can easily equate to the rich countries' exploitation of the planet's resources and multinational

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companies' abuse of workers and tax systems. James describes true followers of God, as those who come to the aid of orphans and widows who represent the oppressed and exploited of any time and place. What does that say about the way we view and treat refugees? About whether we speak out about our government's treatment of refugees? About whether we speak out about the government's cutting of the aid budget? In many contexts, the denouncement of the rich in the Letter of James would be considered communism. Or as a colleague said recently at the EM2 meeting at Westminster College – the gospel is dangerous – we need to move away from our white-washed reading of the Bible that supports our comfortable, affluent lifestyle in the UK. If we are serious about the gospel of Jesus, which James espouses, and if we are serious about combatting climate change, it calls for a radical restructuring of our lives and our societies – not just a bit a recycling and a few solar panels – but a massive reduction in consumption. There are many orphans and widows in our world, and many causes we could take up as doing the will of God, but it seems to me, that the most pressing issue, that encompasses many facets of inequality and injustice is the climate crisis.

For James, Christians are recognised not by their *being* but by their doing. He wants us to be signs of God's reign, a model different to the values of the world, and he makes three challenges to the communities he was writing to – communities of Christians in diaspora, communities who were persecuted and vulnerable due to events beyond their control, a severe famine that resulted in mass migration – there we already see parallels with our world of people being forced to move due to the floods, droughts and fires of climate change. His three challenges are: militant patience – that is a patience which is active, not passive, the kind of patience shown by civil rights activists waiting decades for change; integrity, and effective prayer, and what he focusses on most is integrity – let your words match your actions, and your actions match your words. And the undergirding of these challenges is the unconditional and sincere love for members of our community and beyond. The new and sole commandment of Jesus Christ, that we love God and we love our neighbour. And who is our neighbour? The whole world. "You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

Hymn For Everyone born <https://youtu.be/hmUJvzRal4> the words are in the video, but for those who cannot watch:

For everyone born, a place at the table,
for everyone born, clean water and bread,
a shelter, a space, a safe place for growing,
for everyone born, a star overhead,

*and God will delight when we are creators
of justice and joy, compassion and peace:
yes, God will delight when we are creators
of justice, justice and joy!*

For woman and man, a place at the table,
revising the roles, deciding the share,
with wisdom and grace, dividing the power,
for woman and man, a system that's fair,

For young and for old, a place at the table,
a voice to be heard, a part in the song,
the hands of a child in hands that are
wrinkled,
for young and for old, the right to belong,

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For just and unjust, a place at the table,
abuser, abused, with need to forgive,
in anger, in hurt, a mindset of mercy,
for just and unjust, a new way to live,

For everyone born, a place at the table,
to live without fear, and simply to be,
to work, to speak out, to witness and worship,
for everyone born, the right to be free,

Shirley Erena Murray © 1998, Hope Publishing Company

Prayers of Intercession and thanks

I was thinking of us listening to *Another Day in Paradise* by the band Genesis at some point during the service, but I suspect we would run into copyright issues. The words are at the end of this document if you would like to use them as an additional reflection, and/or watch the video on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/Qt2mbGP6vFI>

God of love and power, hear our prayers
as we raise our thoughts and our voices to you.
We pray for those who suffer and are sick . . .
God of love and power, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who struggle with temptation and sin . . .
God of love and power, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who lead and guide others on the journey of faith . . .
God of love and power, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for the world and its leaders . . .
God of love and power, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for environmental campaigns and climate change activists . . .
God of love and power, **hear our prayer.**

We give thanks for those who are cheerful
and who bring joy to our lives . . .
God of love and power, **we give you praise.**

We give thanks for those who are loving and kind . . .
God of love and power, **we give you praise.**

We give thanks for those who serve and lead us in our journeys of faith . . .
God of love and power, **we give you praise.**

We give thanks for this earth and its bounty . . .
God of love and power, **we give you praise.**

We give thanks for Christ's grace in our lives, and for the presence of God in our world . . .
God of love and power, **we give you praise.**

God of love and power,
make our eyes and our hearts more open to the needs of others,
especially the hungry, the hurting, and the poor.
Help us to see that in caring for the Earth, we are also caring for one another.
And help us, O Lord, to live in ways that promote respect,
compassion, justice, and peace for all people,
and for all of your broken and yet beautiful creation,
as hearers and doers of your holy Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

Lord's Prayer

Hymn I have a dream

“I have a dream”, a man once said,
“where all is perfect peace;
where men and women, black and white,
stand hand in hand, and all unite
in freedom and in love.”

But in this world of bitter strife
the dream can often fade;
reality seems dark as night,
we catch but glimpses of the light
Christ sheds on humankind.

Fierce persecution, war, and hate
are raging everywhere;
God calls us now to pay the price
through struggles and through sacrifice
of standing for the right.

So dream the dreams and sing the songs,
but never be content:
for thoughts and words don't ease the pain:
unless there's action, all is vain;
faith proves itself in deeds.

Lord, give us vision, make us strong,
help us to do your will;
don't let us rest until we see
your love throughout humanity
uniting us in peace.

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Blessing from 'The Scandalous Message of James: Faith Without Works is Dead, by Elsa Tamez, adapted from a eulogy given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965

Holy One, help us not to remain indifferent and silent behind the safe security of stained-glass windows. We pray that we do not ignore the basic oppression that we participate in, ignoring what stares us in the face because life is much more comfortable and convenient that way. Give us the courage to stand amid social evil and serve as a headlight – a powerful voice, not a weak echo. Help us to substitute courage for caution, clarity for confusion. Deepen our faith so that we may work passionately, unrelentingly to bring good out of evil. Give us the power we need. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love. God, guide our feet once again to demand justice and to stand for love. Amen.

Music to end: 'The Swan' C Saint-Saens (1835-1921) performed by members of Downing Place, URC, used with permission. A link to the video is here <https://youtu.be/7VBiOyWNIko>

Hymns used under the Christ Church CCLI licence 63352

Another Day in Paradise, by Genesis: <https://youtu.be/Qt2mbGP6vFI>

She calls out to the man on the street
"Sir, can you help me?
It's cold and I've nowhere to sleep
Is there somewhere you can tell me?"

He walks on, doesn't look back
He pretends he can't hear her
Starts to whistle as he crosses the street
Seems embarrassed to be there

Oh, think twice, 'cause it's another day for you and me in paradise
Oh, think twice, 'cause it's another day for you
You and me in paradise

Think about it

She calls out to the man on the street
He can see she's been crying
She's got blisters on the soles of her feet
She can't walk but she's trying

Oh, think twice, 'cause it's another day for you and me in paradise
Oh, think twice, it's just another day for you
You and me in paradise

Just think about it

Oh Lord, is there nothing more anybody can do?
Oh Lord, there must be something you can say

You can tell from the lines on her face
You can see that she's been there
Probably been moved on from every place
'Cause she didn't fit in there

Oh, think twice, 'cause it's another day for you and me in paradise
Oh, think twice, it's just another day for you
You and me in paradise