

Christ Church, 1 May 2022.

Call to worship (inspired by Psalm 30 and John 21: 1-19)

Brothers and sisters. If you lift your net and it is empty,
Come here! **We'll cast it out again into Christ's abundance.**

If you open your eyes but do not recognize the Holy One,
Come here! **We'll find the Risen Christ here among us.**

If your life is filled with mourning,
Come here! **Christ is leading a dance of joy.**

Come, sisters and brothers
To give blessing and honour and glory to God!

from *Feed My Lambs*, written by Rev. Quentin Chin

Hymn O love that wilt not let me go R&S 511

O love that wilt not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee
I give thee back the life I owe
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be

O joy that seekest me through pain
I cannot close my heart to thee
I trace the rainbow through the rain
and feel the promise is not vain
that morn shall tearless be

O light that followest all my way
I yield my flickering torch to thee
my heart restores its borrowed ray
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be

O cross that liftest up my head
I dare not ask to fly from thee
I lay in dust life's glory dead
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be

George Matheson

Both of today's readings are about discipleship – about following Christ and what that means. The first reading from John's gospel, describes the third time that Jesus showed himself to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. And he tells Simon Peter what he must do if he really loves the Lord and wants to follow Jesus. The second reading from Acts tells us of Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road, and how he will be 'an instrument' to take Jesus' message to the Gentiles.

Our opening prayer comes from the General Secretary of the URC, Rev John Bradbury.

Opening Prayer URC Prayer Handbook, p36

Gifts

Holy One, all that we have comes from you. Accept our gifts for your work in the world, and to you be the glory and praise always. **Amen**

Hymn Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult R&S 355

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.

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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."

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

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."

Cecil Frances Alexander

Bible reading: John 21:1-19

Before I get to the main point of this story, I just want to dwell on some of the things said in the reading we have just heard, because they strike me as quite strange! Last week's story of doubting Thomas ends with the writer of John telling us that 'Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book', in other words, it sounds like he can't be bothered to tell us, yet now he goes on to describe Jesus appearing on a beach in great detail. We get Thomas and Nathanael with added descriptions – Thomas the twin and Nathanael of Cana, the sons of Zebedee and 'two others' – did the writer get bored? Had he forgotten their names? Why were Thomas and Nathanael important enough to get a name check and the others weren't? Except of course for Simon Peter who later on becomes the main character in the story.

Simon Peter decides to go fishing, and the others go with him. They fish all night but catch nothing. Then, just after daybreak, Jesus appears on the beach, but they don't know it is him. This is a feature of all of the stories about Jesus appearing – no one recognises him at first, and we might ask why, given that these people have been his closest followers for several years, but I'm afraid you'll have to ponder that one yourselves or we'll be here all day! This unknown man shouts out to them to put their nets out on the right side of the boat, and even though they don't know him from Adam, they do it. And now, suddenly, there are so many fish they can't lift the net into the boat. Then the disciple whom 'Jesus loved' recognises the man on the beach as Jesus. I don't have an answer to this question, but I'd like us to pause for a moment, and consider, why is there one disciple that Jesus loved more than the others? Surely, in the same way that parents should not show favouritism to one child over another, you would think that Jesus shouldn't have a favourite disciple. But this phrase appears six times in John's gospel yet nowhere else. This may be because this beloved disciple is believed to be the person who wrote the Gospel (in fact he says so at the very end of chapter 21 if you want to read ahead), so perhaps he's just bigging himself up. Or maybe it is a way of showing that Jesus was human. We all have people we like more than others. Most people have a best friend they enjoy spending time with more than

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with other people. Someone who 'gets' them, who they feel more comfortable with, so why should Jesus be any different? But I don't have time to go down that tangent either – something else to think about during the week perhaps, if you've nothing better to do! And, in case you are wondering, this 'love' and the question he asks Simon Peter – 'do you love me' is *agape* the Greek word for a very specific kind of love, that we called Christian love, since English only has one word for love where Greek has three. It is a kind of caring, communal, taking care of others kind of love, nothing romantic, nor the love of obligation that might be the case in caring for family members you are not that fond of.

Anyway, back to the story and another odd detail – when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put some clothes on because he was naked. Why did the writer feel the need to include that titbit? I'd be very surprised if a Jewish man of that era actually was fishing completely naked, so perhaps he just had his shirt off, but why was he bothered about Jesus seeing him like that? These are a group of men who have lived on the road together for years, sleeping rough or staying in people's houses; would they not be familiar enough to not worry about that sort of thing?

By the time they get to shore, Jesus already has a barbeque going with bread and fish on the grill, like one of those cookery programmes where they take something they have made earlier out of the oven. Jesus says, bring some of the fish you caught, so Simon Peter went to boat and hauled the net ashore. It was full of large fish, 153 of them. Why are we given that detail? Who cares? Who counted them? Why? That is an awful lot of fish to count! Of course it shows the generosity of God's love, just as the story of the feeding of the five thousand does when there were baskets leftover, but surely just saying the net was full would have been enough! Jesus invites them to have breakfast and none of them address the elephant in the room, namely that the chef with the barbeque tongs is none other than Jesus who was crucified a few days ago. We are told that none of them dared ask who he was because they knew it was Jesus, presumably because the most loved disciple had let the fish out of the bag on the boat.

After breakfast, we get to the real message of this bizarre account, Jesus starts asking Simon Peter the same question over and over, a bit like a jealous lover or a nagging spouse – 'do you love me?' Well, if you love me, show it, don't just say it. Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep! I think I can pretty safely say that these were not Jesus' exact words, and this is not to be taken literally as feeding actual sheep. John has already introduced earlier in his gospel the idea of Jesus as the good shepherd and all those who might follow him as his sheep. Jesus is, if you like, passing on his shepherd's crook to Simon Peter. He is passing on the baton. It will be Peter's job now to take care of the flock

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because Jesus won't physically be there. He says as much, in a roundabout way – when you, Peter, were younger, you could do what you wanted and go where you wanted, but now you have responsibilities, someone else will lead you where you don't want to go and tell you what to do. And Jesus' final words from today's reading are 'follow me'. So before we hear about Saul and the Damascus road, we're going to sing –

Hymn Will you come and follow me R&S 558

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 leave your self 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?

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?

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.

John Bell and Graham Maule

Bible reading: Acts 9:1-9, 17-19

The lectionary gives part of this story, verses 7-20 as optional, which is partly why we didn't read them all. Ananias, who is supposed to go and cure Saul of his blindness, says to Jesus who has appeared to him in a vision, that this Saul is an evil man who has done terrible things to the followers of Jesus. But Jesus says, he has chosen him as an instrument to take his message to the Gentiles. Both Simon Peter and Saul, soon to become Paul the apostle, are instruments of God, as all of us are. They will have to do things they don't want to do and go to places they don't want to go for the sake of Jesus and the gospel, just as we have to. They will suffer and both ultimately die for the cause. Ananias goes to Saul, and the 'scales fall from his eyes' and he was baptised. Saul suddenly had a new way of seeing others and relating to them. He went from persecuting the followers of Jesus, the people of the Way, to being baptised and becoming part of their movement and not only that, he became one of Christianity's greatest preachers and church founders, forming Christian communities in many parts of the Roman Empire. His conversion is not a conversion from one faith to another – Christianity was not yet a religion, they were all Jews; it was an epiphany about how to treat people he disagreed with. Saul

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has a new way of seeing and relating to people he didn't understand and whom he thought he had nothing in common with. He gets a new vision about how to treat all people with respect. Saul's Damascus Road moment shows us how people can be transformed when they acknowledge the pain and damage of trying to force others to see the world as they do. As we continue to talk about plans for our building and our mission, as we work out ways to be more part of the surrounding community and meet their needs, let us, like Saul, have the scales removed from our eyes. Let us disagree with respect and not force ideas on others, to the glory of God and walking in the Way of Jesus.

Hymn Sing for God's glory (words from Church Hymnary 4, tune – *Loben den Herren*)

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 bind 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;
Lifeflood of right, resisting evil and slight,
Offering freedom's transfusion.

Kathryn Galloway

Prayers of intercession (inspired by Acts 9: 1-6)

Hear our prayer O God, as we hear your call
If only the world heard your voice as clearly as Paul
and recognized its truth
grant us the wisdom to hear your voice and the strength to be your voice in this world.

So we pray for this world which has
so much violence and so few solutions;
so much fear and panic,
so many worries about daily living, about paying bills, about keeping healthy.

We pray for those who find that prejudice is their way of life;
for those who are trapped and caught up in misunderstanding and discrimination
and for those living with and making decisions about how our society lives.

We pray for Ukraine, her people and the countries on her borders
We pray for those who cannot escape war zones,
for those with little left to eat or drink,
for all those who have been displaced by conflict.

We pray for those who experience any form of prejudice;
for those who physically or emotionally build walls,
for those who live with extreme views of religion
for those who are self-interested.

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And we pray for ourselves – for our church meeting today,
grant us the wisdom to see your vision for Christ Church in this town of Raleigh.
We pray for the needs of our family and friends,
for those who we know who are ill and those now recovering;
those who are lonely, anxious, confused, or stressed
and for those who bring colour back to life.
Let our eyes be opened to new ways of seeing and relating.
Help us to be grateful for your abundance and be generous in sharing it, in Jesus' name

Lord's Prayer

Hymn Go to the world! Tune *Engelberg* at R&S 414

Go to the world! Go into all the earth.
Go preach the cross where Christ renews life's worth,
baptising as the sign of our rebirth.
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go into every place.
Go live the Word of God's redeeming grace.
Go seek God's presence in each time and space.
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go struggle, bless and pray;
the nights of tears give way to joyous day.
As servant Church, you follow Christ's own way.
Alleluia!

Go to the world! Go as the ones I send,
for I am with you 'til the age shall end,
when all the hosts of glory cry 'Amen!'
Alleluia!

Sylvia G. Dunstan (1955-1993)

Blessing (inspired by John 21:1-19)

As you go out into the world,
seek the presence of the Risen Christ in each other and in all of Creation.
May God give you joyful courage to follow the command of Jesus:
"Feed my lambs." "Tend my sheep." "Feed my sheep."
And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen

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