

Call to Worship (based on Luke 14:7-14))

Creator God, you call us to hospitality;
to give as generously to others as you have given to us.
For there are angels among us.
Loving God, you call us to give you glory
in the compassion we show to one another.
To love without judgment, of ourselves or of others.
We gather as one body, seeking to walk in the way you have set for us.
We gather as one, to worship the One who is Love.

HYMN Oh Lord my God R&S 117

Offering

Opening Prayer

Lord, give us the eyes of Jesus
to see our neighbours and the strangers we meet.
Teach us what it means to love the stranger as we love ourselves.
Forgive us for our selfishness, for our silence,
for not caring enough for the strangers who come to our communities.
Teach us to love and care for the stranger the way you do. Amen

URC Prayer Handbook p56

HYMN Think of a world R&S 123

Readings: Jeremiah 2:4-13
 Luke 14:1, 7-14

While I was on study leave, I read this book (Being Interrupted). It talked about lots of things, but one of the things it talked about was the structure of worship and what the aim of worship is. Traditionally in Sunday worship, we gather together, the Word is read and preached, we respond in some way – usually in prayers, hymns and once a month with Communion, and we are sent out into the world. In many ways the focus is on the sending out bit. We sometimes think of ourselves as coming for spiritual re-fuelling after a week of giving out to the world, or simply coping with our world. Worship is thought of as giving us the energy and inspiration to go out into the world again and be God's hands out in the world, praying, doing good deeds, trying to tackle injustices in some way or simply dealing with our own problems – illness, age, death of friends and family. The book gave two main ways we do this – by thinking what would Jesus do. What would Jesus do, for example, if he saw a homeless person in the street? And we try to act like we think Jesus would act. The other way is to see Jesus as our neighbour (Matt 25:34-40) and so we try to see Jesus in our neighbours and act accordingly. In both these models, the focus is on us as Christians, what we need and what we do, rather than inviting our non-Christian neighbours in to tell us what they would like help with, to simply listen to them.

The book suggested various ideas for ways to achieve this, but I think most of them probably wouldn't work here – the book was written by a vicar living in a very run-down area

of an inner city – and in some ways this church is already very embedded in the community and does lots of things for and with the community. But there was one idea I rather liked for bringing the outside world into worship, and it seems to fit well with our Bible readings today. What they started doing at the beginning of worship every week was to ask the congregation two questions, for them to spend a few minutes reflecting quietly, or to chat with two or three people nearby. The answers could then be incorporated into the prayers later and if anyone particularly wanted to share something they could do that.

The 2 questions are:

What do you bring with you, from your week in the world, that you want to say thank you to God for?

What do you come with, that weighs heavily on you, that you want to bring to God in prayer? (either close to home or further afield, or in other parts of the world)

Do this a bit at Tuesday Church. Ask if they want to do it now

What does this have to do with our Bible readings, I hear you ask?! Well, several words leapt out at me, particularly from the Jeremiah reading as linking to recent and ongoing news items and the overall idea from the Luke also chimes with situations from the news.

Read Jeremiah from the Poverty & Justice Bible These are some of the words that struck me DROUGHT, A CRIME, APPALLED, REJECTED, CRACKED AND LEAKING PITS, TAKE YOU TO COURT, WORTHLESS. **Is there anything in the news that you think of hearing this reading and these words?**

We are of course in a drought. The water companies have been accused of not fixing leaks which is where most water is lost, which could be described as a crime; it is certainly a crime against the planet. Should they be taken to court? In our reading God says he will take the people to court because of their crime of rejecting Him. And just this week we have heard how barristers are going on strike, which will add to the already huge backlog of cases to be tried. Energy prices are soaring, people are already in fuel poverty and come October many more people will be choosing between eating and heating their homes. One newspaper article, talking about a community in Wales said that “Britain is sliding towards a humanitarian catastrophe. That term is usually reserved for faraway countries devastated by hurricanes or drought, rather than rich societies... but the UN definition of a humanitarian crisis is ‘a singular event or a series of events that are threatening in terms of health, safety or wellbeing of a large group of people.’” We essentially have no government at the moment, as our current Prime Minister has abdicated all responsibility while he suns himself on a Greek beach, and the two candidates don’t look very promising. Democracy is broken,

as for the second time in just a few years the country's leader will be chosen by less than 1% of the population! As Jeremiah might say, things are utterly desolate!

So we come to What Would Jesus Do? We hear a bit of what Jesus thinks in the parable he tells the lawyers and Pharisees – the religious and community leaders of the time. He tells them to be humble – don't take the best place at the table, but take a lower place, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. This reminded me of the article about food and fuel poverty. Food banks were meant to be a stopgap, a temporary, emergency help for a small number of people. Their use has skyrocketed, with even working people now sometimes needing to use them. The food donated, and there is now less and less being donated, is not the food people would choose for themselves, "it's a model that says we know you're poor and this will do," this is good enough for you. It is the people at the top of the table looking down on those at the bottom and not really caring.

And as if that weren't enough, Jesus goes on to say, when you have a dinner, don't invite your family and friends who you know will invite you back some time, but give a banquet and invite "the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind." Can we do that, as a church? As individuals?

If we think Sunday worship is about filling us up, about getting our spiritual fill to make us feel better and give us energy to face another week are we sitting at the top of the table or the bottom? Do we see ourselves as the people who donate to food banks, or the people who one day soon might need the food bank ourselves?

Another thing this book reminded me of, was different ways of reading the Bible. One of them is to focus firstly on the verbs in a passage, the action words, who says them and who does the action. There are three commands from God in the reading from Jeremiah. In fact, it starts with the most important one – LISTEN. Listen, people of Israel – that's us. Then ASK, ask anyone, anywhere. In this instance it is not ask God, or even ask What Would Jesus Do, but ask our neighbours, ask the world out there, what it needs and wants from us. And then TELL, tell the heavens to tremble with fear, or as the other version has it, 'be appalled, be shocked' be shocked by the state of our country and our world, be shocked by climate change, and hunger and fuel poverty and tell about it – be aware and make others aware before we sleepwalk into a humanitarian crisis.

But can we, this handful of faithful Christians here in Westcliff, really do much about these catastrophes? Perhaps we can do nothing more than Jeremiah and the psalmists and cry out in lament to God. But we should at least do that – see the hurt of the world and join God in crying about it. If we are truly followers of Christ there should be no separation between

worship on Sunday and every other moment of our week, be that leisure or work, hobbies or volunteering, we need to take Christ and our love of God with us out into the world, and we need to bring our concerns and our joys and successes into the house of God and lament them and celebrate them. Let's not just come here to be filled up and sit at the top table, God's chosen, let us do as Jesus commands and invite the poor, the disabled and the marginalised to sit at table with us as equals.

HYMN God in his love for us R&S 85

Prayers of Intercession

God, when we tread a path to your door we find it open and welcoming.

When we make requests of you, even the most difficult or selfish, you give according to your grace and goodness.

Forgive us when we think only of ourselves when we make our requests and demands.

Restore us with the surprise of your willingness to give, your generosity of love.

Teach us to offer ourselves in return to those who make requests of us.

And so, as you told us ask, and taught us how to pray, so we pray now for others -

We bring to mind -

those people who are in need of our prayers:

those who are ill, or anxious;

those who are lonely or sad;

those who are despairing or defeated;

those who are hungry or homeless;

those whose relationships are breaking apart;

those who are bullied or abused;

those who cannot find work;

and those who are over-worked.

In silence now, let us make our own specific prayers

for those on our hearts and minds today. **Include anything from start of service**

In the presence of God, alongside Jesus Christ, with help from the Spirit may we go into this week to live out our prayers through our lives. Amen

Lord's Prayer

HYMN God of freedom R&S 625

Blessing (inspired by Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16)

It's time to go. Time to re-engage with the secular world.

Time to put the faith into deeds .

Time to practice uncalculating love.

Time to meet the Christ who waits for you.

Time to share his boundless hope.

You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you.

With the blessing of God, in your mind and heart, let

each morning be a joy to you,

each path be a joy to you,

each neighbour be a joy to you.

Now and always.. Amen.

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

If we know no dying – Tune: *In the bleak mid-winter*

If we know no dying, if we face no pain,
there can be no rising, life itself is vain.
If there is no grieving, leaving all behind,
there's no new beginning, no new life to find.

In God's holy city, people dwelt secure,
resting on God's promise, confident and sure,
worshipped in the temple, sign that God was near,
symbol of their safety, quelling ev'ry fear.

Yet the Babylonians, came at God's command,
sacked the holy city, plundered all the land;
utter desecration, where God's house should be;
only this destruction set God's people free.

If we face no failure, if left undisturbed,
we'll be trapped for ever, certain but absurd.
Only hands held empty can receive new gifts:
God, please hound and chase us, 'til our tight grasp shifts.

If we know no dying, if we face no pain,
there can be no rising, life itself is vain.
If there is no grieving, leaving all behind,
there's no new beginning, no new life to find.

John Campbell, inspired by the book of Jeremiah
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