

Christ Church United Reformed Church, Rayleigh
Service, Sunday 24 August 2024

Call to Worship:- God be in our heads and in our understanding; God be in our eyes and in my looking;

God be in our mouths and in our speaking; God be in our hearts and in our thinking;

God be at our end and at our departing. (R & S 498)

Hymn; R&S 92 “Amazing Grace. (John Newton)

1) Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
was blind, but now I see.

2) As grace first taught my hear to fear,
so grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.

3) Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God’s grace has brought me safe thus far
and he will lead me home.

4) The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will be my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.

5) And when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace,

Children’s Time

This morning’s service is all about faith and perhaps we think that this does not apply to young people.

I would like an adult volunteer, please to prove to our youngsters what faith is.

(I take a chair and ask the adult to sit down on it). Why did they do that. Did they have faith that I would not pull away the chair?). Children have all kinds of faith. Faith in their parents will feed and shelter them; faith in their teachers that they will teach them what they need to know as they move through school and above everything

faith in their friends, This kind of faith is not perhaps a true Christian faith at this stage, but as they move on their Christian journey we hope that their initial idea of faith will become a strong faith in their Heavenly Father and his son Jesus Christ.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we come before your throne of grace, to bow down before you and worship you. We come not because we must, but because we need to apologise for all the things that we have said or thought or done that has not pleased you. We come to admit that our faith in you and your Son, Jesus Christ, has faltered when we have been troubled in our minds and despite our prayers to you, things do not seem to have improved.

Help us to acknowledge that you know what is best for us and that your answer to our prayers might not be exactly what we expect. Help us to be strong in our faith, acknowledging that you are our Shepherd, who will always welcome us if we turn back to you in true sorrow for our actions that have hurt you. Grant us then, Heavenly Father, the grace and the strength of your Holy Spirit to follow in the footsteps of your Son, so that when we are ready to leave our earthly lives, we can do so, confident that we shall be with you.

Now we continue with the Lord's prayer, which will be on the screen and can we say this together:

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours
now and forever. AMEN

Hymn WF 37 "I am a new creation" (David Bilbrough) (Sung twice)

I am a new creation,
No more in condemnation,
Here in the grace of God I stand.
My heart is overflowing,
My love just keeps on growing
Here in the grace of God I stand.
And I will praise you Lord,
Yes I will praise you Lord
and I will sing of all that you have done.
a joy that knows no limit,
a lightness in my spirit

here in the grace of God I stand.

Reading: Psalm 124 (Sue)

Talk 1

Right a question for you! Do you know what Faith is and could you explain it to an agnostic or atheist? Tough task I know!

In the Chambers Dictionary, part of the definition of “faith” is “trust or confidence; belief in the truth of a revealed religion. Confidence and trust in God; the living reception of religious belief” Quite a lot to take in, I think. I do not know about you, but if someone suddenly asked me about my faith, I would have to think long and hard before giving an answer that is not oversimplified or trite. Have a think later about how you would answer that question.

The problem that I have to contend with time and time again, is that faith is not something you can see, can touch or can or physically feel. It is in our minds that we know (or don't know) what our faith is.

It is amazing when non-believers chose to ask the question “what is faith and what do you believe” I remember playing a game of bridge (not for stakes you understand!) with some friends in the company hostel when I worked for Sun Alliance at their Horsham head office when one of them came out with the question, how was the earth created and was quite put out when I did not follow the creation story and then followed it up by asking what is faith. As you can imagine at the age of 23, I found this last question quite difficult to answer.

The problem that this creates is that in this 21st Century and perhaps for millenia before, people have found it very difficult to accept something that they cannot see or touch. They keep asking for proof, but the rub is that even a committed Christian can only state what they believe. It is not like scientific facts which can be shown to be correct, although even here what was believed even 100 years ago is beginning to change as we begin to understand more and more about the world around us and how things react with each other.

Once we have had our New Testament reading, I shall be looking at two examples of faith and trying to see if by understanding these we can come to a closer understanding of “Faith”.

Hymn: R&S 509 (WH Ferguson)

O Jesus, I have promised,
to serve thee to the end;
be thou for ever near me,
my Master and my Friend;
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
if thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me;
the world is ever near,
I see the lights that dazzle,
the tempting sounds I hear;
my foes are ever near me,
around me and within;
but, Jesus, draw thou nearer,
and shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking
in accents clear and still,
above the storms of passion,
the murmurs of self will.
O speak to reassure me,
to hasten or control;
O speak and make me listen,
thou guardian of my soul.

Reading: Matthew CH 15 vv21-29 (Sue)

Talk 2

We can look at both Readings that I chose for this morning from the Lectionary this morning and see examples of faith.

This Psalm was one of a group of Psalms known as Songs of Ascent. That is sung as people made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They were actually singing their faith as hopefully we are this morning. God had been on their side and had that not been the case they would have been swallowed up by their enemies. As they sang their help is in the name of the Lord, so that was also true for John Newton, the author of our opening hymn this morning.

Newton was brought by a non-conformist mother and a father who was a merchant ship captain. His mother died when he was aged 7 and by 11 he was accompanying his father on sea voyages. He was pressed into service with the Royal Navy. After attempting to desert, he was relieved of his post and sent aboard a passing slave vessel. He thought that this was an easy and creditable way of life and served on many ships in the slave trade achieving the rank of Master in charge of navigation, having taught himself geometry and Latin. At this time in his life he had almost forgotten the Christian values taught to him by his mother, but not quite for God had a plan for him. He continued in the slave trade until 1754 when ill health forced him to find new employment. Prior to this he felt the stirring of a renewal of his faith, but strangely he found no conflict between that and his working in the slave trade.

Back on dry land he felt drawn to a religious profession and became an ordained Church of England minister and at this time contributed to a book of hymns amongst which was "Amazing Grace". So perhaps now we can see the strong profession of his faith, for as that grew he realised how wrong the slave trade was and became an ardent abolitionist. Now we can see why he wrote the hymn for it encapsulated his

growing faith. Yes, the amazing grace of God's love had saved him, despite his less than Christian life involved in the slave trade and as he writes in verse in the final verse, after all God's goodness to him "and when this heart and flesh shall fail and mortal life shall cease, I shall possess within the veil a life of joy and peace. True faith indeed.

The second example of faith I want to look at is the woman in the reading we heard from Matthew. She had love, but above all she had faith. A faith that grew which grew with contact with Jesus. She had faith that Jesus could cure her daughter, no doubt having heard many stories of the wonderful things this man could do. Despite being seen by many around Jesus as a problem for not only was she a Gentile, she was of the old Canaanite stock and the Canaanites were the ancestral enemies of the Jews, Jesus finally granted her wish despite all this back history and this increased her faith, for in the beginning she called Son of David, a popular and political title, but at the end she was calling him Lord.

Her faith worshipped for she began by following and ended up on her knees. She began with a request but ended with a prayer. She surely is an example to us. Okay, admittedly she had the advantage of having Jesus before her in the flesh and it is perhaps easier to have faith in that situation, but nonetheless she shows us what faith can achieve.

I think both John Newton and the Gentile woman can teach us something. Firstly, despite his inauspicious beginnings, Newton found a renewed faith and acknowledges his surprise and gratitude that God saved a wretch like him. So we too can be rescued by our faith despite our less than perfect lives. The story of the Canaanite woman again shows the power of faith, a faith that can move mountains, but like John Newton a faith that worshipped God and Jesus as well.

So let me return to my question posed at the very beginning. Can you explain not only what faith is, but what your faith is.

My faith is based on three things:

Firstly a belief in God, who created me and who has been with me in all kinds of situations, where I have been grieving or unsure where I should be or even where I felt that I was alone, although in reality that was never the case.

Secondly, a belief in Jesus Christ, who is my Lord and Saviour and who throughout my life has been ready to walk alongside me and show me the way.

Thirdly, a belief in God's Holy Spirit which has strengthened and sustained me when I was in the depths of despair or when I was scared to move forward.

May you also be able to talk about your faith, for without that ability, how are we to draw new people into the church,

Giving them a new belief and a new faith just as John Newton found a new faith.

AMEN

Hymn R&S 497 (A prayer set to music!) (Caryl Micklem)

Give me, Lord, a thankful heart
and a discerning mind:
give, as I play the Christian's part,
the strength to finish what I start
and act on what I find.

When, in the rush of days, my will
is habit-bound and slow
help me to keep in vision still
what love and power and peace can fill
a life that trusts in you.

By your divine and urgent claim
and by your human face
kindle our sinking hearts to flame
and as you teach the world your name
let it become your place.

Jesus with all your Church I long
to see your kingdom come:
show me your way of righting wrong
and turning sorrow into song
until you bring me home.

Prayers of Intercession (Sue)

Hymn R&S 474 (Richard Gillard)

Brother, sister let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

We are pilgrims on a journey,
and companions on the road;
we are here to help each other
walk the mile and bear the load.

I will hold the Christ-light for you
in the night-time of your fear,
I will hold my hand out to you,
speak the peace you long to hear.

I will weep when you are weeping;

When you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
till we've seen this journey through.

When we sing to God in heaven
we shall find such harmony,
born of all we've known together
of Christ's love and agony.

Brother, sister let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.

Blessing and dismissal

Our time of worshiping God our father has come to an end;
May you take what blessings you have received with you
so that you can be God's face in the world.
Behold the empty cross showing that our
Saviour has risen from the dead and will act as our guide
showing us the right road to take.
May God's Holy Spirit strengthen, sustain and guide
you to do your Father's will.

AMEN

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