

Call to worship (based on Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22)

God's faithful love endures for ever and ever.

Because of God's everlasting goodness,
we offer God our thanks and praise.

God's faithful love endures for ever and ever.

Because of God's care and concern for humanity,
we offer God our thanks and praise.

God's faithful love endures for ever and ever.

Because of God's transforming powers and actions,
we gather as a community of faith and trust in God
and we offer God our thanks and praise.

Hymn God is love MP 187

Offering

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.**

Opening Prayers

We praise you loving and eternal God for your love of all people
expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

We praise you for his commitment to justice, his zeal for true worship of you
and his willingness to replace all other sacrifices with the sacrifice of his own life.

In his name we offer you our worship.

Prayer of Confession

God, you loved this world so much that you sent your own son, Jesus Christ
to live and die among us, in order that we might have life.

Forgive us for keeping that abundant life to ourselves,
for jealously hoarding your generous gifts,
for choosing self-interest over compassion and justice.

Teach us what it means to live as children of the light,
generously sharing your abundance with our brothers and sisters in need. **Amen**

Assurance of Pardon (2 Peter 1:19)

Do not be afraid. God's light has come into the world and has scattered the darkness; the morning
star rises in our hearts. Rejoice! For God does not hold our mistakes against us but embraces us as
God's own beloved. **Amen**

Hymn Amazing Grace MP 31

Bible readings: **Ephesians 2:1-10**
 John 3:14-21

Our reading from John's gospel contains one of the best-known lines in the Bible – "For
God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him
may not perish but may have eternal life." In some circles this verse is used to try to
persuade people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. Having been born and raised a

Christian, it's hard for me to tell if hearing that sentence would persuade me to suddenly become a Christian. The God loving the world bit sounds good, though you can argue, and many people do, that if God really loved the world, there wouldn't be so many awful things happening. But you'd have to unpack the 'reward' for believing in Jesus a bit - what does 'eternal life' really mean? I'm not convinced that living forever would be so great. In fact, there have been a quite a few films that explore immortality and it tends to not be much fun. We need to move beyond the historical romanticizing of this particular verse in this reading and try to find the new and revolutionary ideas within it. By romanticizing what I am referring to is the somewhat simplistic view that God gave Jesus to come to earth to save it with love and to literally save it by sacrificing his body without attempting to rid the world of evil, but by magically saving people who simply believed in him.

Most likely John did not intend to promote such a simplistic view. It is therefore necessary to ask some pertinent questions of him and of this gospel lesson: What does believing in Jesus really mean? Why did Jesus need to come into the world? Was it because of sin? If indeed Jesus came to the world to save it from sin, what kind of sin? For John, sin seems to be concrete and structural, that is injustice, hate, lack of mercy, and so on, rather than individualistic.

If we read this lectionary passage within the context of the wider gospel of John and consider all seven verses we're given today as seriously as verse 16, we might discover the revolutionary nature of John's words, rather than what appears to be a romantic understanding of God's saving act in this well-known passage. The key to unravelling the meaning of these verses can be found in verses 19-21. John states: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God." God loves the world and God sends Jesus to (magically) save it or to fix it. To change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice, oppression and replaces it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, and equality. However, verses 19-21 tell us that some people choose hate over light, evil deeds over good deeds, and therefore they reject the light of the Son of God. Others, agree with Jesus' quest to change or restore the world to its original intent, from a world full of evil and injustice to a loving, just and caring world. So, for John, believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe regarding hate, exploitation, and injustice rather an esoteric "religious" conversion.

In other words, one's disposition to do good reflects a person's true character, and belief system, and therefore becomes a factor in determining whether they will reject or accept Jesus. We can conclude that for John, believing in Jesus' message had more to do with agreeing with His teachings than with having some sort of change of heart, and miraculously becoming a Christian – indeed, at the time that John wrote his Gospel, Christianity as a religion did not exist. The early communities were made up of Jews who had come to believe Jesus was the Messiah and followed his teachings. They were known as people of The Way. The challenge posed by the coming of Jesus is that we are called to state who we are, what we stand for, and what exactly we believe. This is the challenge of this text – not whether you will be born again in the Spirit and have eternal life, but what decisions we will make about the evils of hate, exploitation, and oppression that surround us. Can we really stay neutral in the midst of wrongdoing? It seems that John was letting us know that whether or not to believe in Jesus cannot be a neutral decision. Jesus demands a stance, which requires active decision-making. Neutrality and indecisiveness are not an option. To follow Jesus requires the courage to swim upstream against the strong currents of a society that promotes divisiveness and hatred.

Some commentators and preachers focus on one word in this passage – “whoever”. Whoever believes in Jesus the Son will have eternal life. This can be uplifting to anyone who has traditionally been excluded from church or society – Black people, the LGBT community, women and so on, for John tells us that ‘whoever’ believes will have eternal life, and he says it again in verse 16 – everyone will have eternal life. God does not discriminate or exclude, God loves everyone, and so, therefore, should we.

We might also focus on “For God so loved the world ...” These words indicate yet a different sort of broadening out of Jesus' message. This reference to the ‘world’ introduces another way in which God's love expands, includes more and more, and grows deeper and wider as we move through the text. We should note that while ‘world’ in John's Gospel refers to everything in all creation - “the world came into being through him ” (1:9); the world is often used to refer specifically to those realms within the human community that resist or are hostile to God and Christ, as in John 7:7 where Jesus says: “The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil.” While the world is often pictured by John as hostile to God, it is also God's creation. God loves his enemies, those who have rebelled against God, and that is the model for Christian love. It is not enough to simply believe in Jesus and hope that will magically save us, whatever being ‘saved’ means. We must love as God and Jesus love – expansively and inclusively. We must be willing to know what we believe and stand up for it. We must be willing to take

sides and stand up for justice, compassion, mercy, love, and equality. That may mean taking a stand even when you know others will disagree with you. And in an election year, it will mean thinking very carefully about the kind of world and society God wants, and which of the imperfect human options available, might come closest to achieving that.

Hymn There's a wideness in God's mercy MP 683

LORD'S SUPPER

Infinite Love, heart of all life, you loved this word into being with such love as to birth yourself among us, Love begotten as the Beloved.

Opening ourselves to your love we live beyond our mortal selves and join your eternal Oneness. Your presence does not separate but unites; love does not push away, but embraces; you do not condemn, but save. Trusting this we know we are loved, and never rejected. And so we come to your table, to remember the gift of the life and death of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Come to this table, you who are beloved in Christ. Come, not because you must, but because you may.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Loving God, the world you made is beautiful and full of wonder.

You made us, with all your creatures, and you love all that you have made.

You gave us the words of your prophets, the stories of your people throughout the generations, and the gathered wisdom of many years.

You gave us Jesus, your Son, to be born and to grow up in difficult times where there was little peace.

He embraced people with your love and told stories to change us all.

He healed those in pain and brought to life those who had lost hope.

He made friends with anyone who would listen and loved even his enemies.

For these things, he suffered. For these things, he died.

And he was raised from death and lives with you forever.

You give us your Holy Spirit, to teach and to strengthen us, to remind us of Jesus Christ and to make us one in him.

For all these gifts we thank you, and join with all your people on earth and in heaven, in joyful praise, saying:

Holy, holy, holy Lord

God of power and might,

heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

This is the mystery of faith:

Christ has died

Christ is risen

Christ will come again.

Lord God, send your Holy Spirit upon this bread and wine, and upon your people, that Christ may be with us, and we may be ready to live for you and do what you ask of us, today and every day to come. **Amen**

On the night when he was betrayed, Jesus took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, this is my body which is broken for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup after supper saying, this cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Sharing of bread and wine

Prayer after communion

Most gracious God, we thank you for what you have given us.
You have fed us with the bread of life and renewed us for your service.
Now we give ourselves to you, and ask that our daily living
may be part of the life of your kingdom, and that our love may be your love
reaching out into the life of the world, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Prayers of intercession

Today, we heard of God's love for the whole world – no one excluded and so we pray especially for those people for whom we hold little respect. The ones we tend to think about little, or who we write off as no-hopers. We pray for them because God loves each one of them just as much as each of us – God sent Jesus for everyone.

God of the whole human family, we pray for drug addicts, dealers, alcoholics, gamblers, those who cheat and rob their own families, and those who mug vulnerable passers-by.
In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for violent gangs, for rebellious teenagers who run away from good homes, those who milk the welfare system, and apparently respectable business men who cheat the elderly and vulnerable out of their life savings. In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for prostitutes and their customers, for those who exploit and abuse children and those who traffic in human lives, extracting money from innocents to escape violence in one country to be exploited in another. In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for terrorists in many lands, for underworld bosses, minders and hit men; for rapists, stalkers, seducers, and those who commit domestic violence.
In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for robbers and tax evaders, shop lifters and vandals, con-men, pickpockets, computer criminals, and burglars who desecrate people's homes.
In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

We pray for people who abuse their positions of trust or power; corrupt lawyers, doctors, politicians, teachers, police officers, prison officers and managers of health care systems and care homes.
In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

On this Mother's Day, we pray not only for our own mothers, but for those whose mothers have died, for those unable to have children, for mothers whose children are taken from them by illness or war, and for those who take advantage of our desire to honour our mothers by taking financial advantage. In your mercy, gracious God, **Hear our prayer**

Most loving God, please do not allow us to become defeatist and bitter. Make us more eager for redemption rather than retribution and encourage us to employ the tough love of Christ in the affairs of our community and nation.

The Bridgwater Drive Church, 10 March 2024

Loving God, giver of all light and life, you sent Jesus Christ into the world not to condemn, but to save. Help us to lift up the light of Christ so that the world might believe in Him and receive the gift of eternal life; through Christ, the light of the world who taught us when we pray to say:

Our Father....

Hymn Christ be our light! MP 1201

Blessing

Just as God's Word was sent into the world to heal and redeem,
so God sends you into the world this day
to be light and love, healing and hope.
Go now to be light for the world!
And may the grace and peace of God the Creator,
the Redeemer, and the Sustainer
be upon you this day and remain with you always. Amen.

The Bridgwater Drive Church sung Blessing.

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