

Call to worship (based on Psalm 139)

We come to worship God,
who loved us before we were yet born,
who knows us even better than we know ourselves,
whose presence never leaves us,
and whose love for us never ceases.
This is our God. Let's worship together!

Hymn Lord of creation R&S 532 (tune *Slane* at R&S 531) / MP 440

Children's time

Gifts

In the offering of our gifts, as well as the living of our days,
may we not grow weary of doing what is right,
but commit to speaking up for the voiceless,
healing the broken, feeding the hungry,
and all those mercies which are such a part of your heart
and your hope for all your people. Amen.

Hymn O God you search me and you know me Red folder 76 / MP 1343

Children leave for Sunday Club

Prayers

We come before You Holy God, knowing we are fearfully and wonderfully made,
remembering how You knit us together in our mother's womb,
giving thanks for the wonders of Your works, and the bounty of Your provision.
We come before You, Risen Lord Jesus, aware of our faults and failings;
even as You know us through and through,
we are aware that we often don't know ourselves very well.
We have turned away from Your love, abused Your creation, turned to lesser gods,
and enslaved ourselves as we live off cheap labour and expensive credit.
Forgive us, Lord, and give us the time and opportunity to change.
We come before You, Most Holy Spirit, knowing You both search and test us,
even as You equip us to serve.
Give us the sense to read the signs of our times, the faith to trust in You,
and the courage to make a difference before it's too late. Amen

The Holy One, the Source of all mercy, through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
has reconciled the world to God's own self
and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins.
So, may we receive both pardon and peace;
We are released from our sins in the name of God, the Sustainer, Redeemer and
bringer of eternal peace. Amen.

Hymn You are before me, Lord, you are behind R&S 731

Bible Readings: **Jeremiah 18:1-11**
 Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

All of the month of September, up to 5th October is the Season of Creation – an annual,
ecumenical celebration of prayer and action for creation. I don't know whether the other

worship leaders in September will focus much on this, but I will refer to concerns about the climate today, and no doubt more when we celebrate Harvest at the beginning of October. Greek plays used to have a technique to solve any plot problems and bring things to a neat conclusion – what’s called *deus ex machina*. A god would be brought on stage by a machine to surprise the audience, resolve the plot, and bring things to a nice conclusion. Many people seem to hope something similar will happen with the climate crisis, that God will take pity on us and sort it all out. It’s a comforting idea in many ways, and an idea found in Biblical times as well, but it’s a false and dangerous idea – humans have made the mess and humanity will have to sort it out, even if it is through God-given ingenuity and scientific developments.

Our first reading from Jeremiah has the prophet countering this idea that God will simply fix everything for us. In Jeremiah’s time there were two dominant, and contrasting, theologies. A “temple theology” held that bad things could not, and would not, happen to the Jewish people as they had been chosen by God from all the peoples of the world. God would protect both the people and the Temple. Whereas the Covenant theology, espoused by Jeremiah and many of the major prophets, held that God gives rewards for obedience and punishment for disobedience. The elite believed and trusted in God’s promises and the idea that God would protect the people no matter what. The prophets taught that a covenant was between two parties and the promises of one were dependent on the promises of the other – if the people had broken their promises to God, God would respond with punishment, usually exile.

To make matters even more difficult, Jeremiah ministered in Jerusalem in the lead up to the invasion and defeat at the hands of Babylon 600 years or so before Jesus. Reluctant to accept a call to ministry, his life was plagued by opposition, imprisonment, and struggle. He foretold the invasion of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the exile of the political and religious elite to Babylon, which didn’t make him popular! Jeremiah taught that the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem was because God wished to punish an unfaithful people for worshiping pagan gods. The nation had turned its back on God, so God withdrew divine blessings. God would not save the day. The people had to answer for their sins. Jeremiah’s illustrates his point with the analogy of the potter who throws away the spoilt clay. God could allow the destruction of the people, the Temple, and the nation in order to reform it; just as the potter reforms the clay when the pot he’s thrown doesn’t work out. God planned for the good but for now there is danger and disaster. The everyday example of a potter working clay is turned into a prophetic warning about the signs of the times – repent or perish. There is still hope, the people (the clay) can be refashioned and moulded into

something wonderful but if they choose not to change their ways then there will be only pain and destruction.

Here in the southeast, especially after the rain we've had this week, we may not think there is much evidence of the climate crisis, but the signs are everywhere. We've had one of the hottest summers for years and many areas of the UK are in drought, with wildfires ranging on the Yorkshire moors. Much of Europe has had unbearable heatwaves with temperatures well over 40 degrees, and the monsoon rain in Pakistan and India has caused disastrous flooding. Just as in Jeremiah's time we need to listen to the prophets who clearly tell us what is going on and what is going to happen and have been doing so for years.

In our contemporary world, however, we don't know ourselves as well as we should. The poet who wrote Psalm 139 has moving and familiar verses. It is comforting to know that God searches and knows us and discerns our thoughts from afar, that God fully knew us even as we were formed in our mothers' wombs. However, the mood changes in verses 19-24 when, in maybe a lack of self-awareness, the poet longs that God would kill the wicked and banish the blood thirsty from their presence. Perhaps unsurprisingly the compilers of the lectionary only gave us selected verses of the psalm to read, missing out the bit that doesn't show the poet in such a good light! If you read all of the psalm, you'll find praise and awe alongside despair at how well the wicked do – similar to Jeremiah's preaching against the elite in Jerusalem who despite turning away from God have done very well up to now. It is the same in our contemporary world – the super-rich, dictators, and huge corporations seem to make more and more money and disregard concerns about the climate, while it is the poorest who suffer most.

As a society we've lost touch with God and worship ourselves as the pinnacle of creation. We ignore creation's groaning and pain as we continue to pollute, pillage and despoil the earth trusting in our flawed technologies, hoping they'll come to the rescue despite much evidence to the contrary. We fool ourselves and destroy the earth.

While I am going to try to link all our three readings, before I continue, we're going to pause to hear **Philemon 1:1-21**

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, with one very specific purpose to make the case for the slave Onesimus. Paul writes this letter from prison, where he has been joined by Onesimus who he has converted to the gospel. Onesimus is a slave of Philemon to whom the letter is addressed. There are two possible reasons why Onesimus is in prison – it could be he has run away from his owner, or it could be that Philemon sent him there to serve Paul. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter. Paul's letter is somewhat vague, so it is difficult to determine exactly what he is asking for – is it simply for

Philemon to accept him back as a slave and forgive anything wrong he may have done that caused him to run away? Or is it that Paul is asking Philemon to release Onesimus to come back and continue serving Paul in prison? Or is Paul asking Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom and treat him like a Christian brother? This seems the most likely interpretation from verse 16 – “receive him back, no longer as a slave, but as a beloved brother.”

The Roman empire was built on the abhorrent system of slavery. In the ancient world anyone could be enslaved; slavery was not a concept based on race as it was in later European and American history. Instead, people could be enslaved through defeat in battle, as a punishment for crime, or for debts. Between 35% and 40% of the population was enslaved - the economy depended on it. Slaves were seen as tools and could be bought and sold at a master's whim. Slaves could be used and abused and were often given their freedom when they were old and sick thus freeing the master of having to care for them. Masters had the absolute power of life and death over slaves; particularly if they ran away. So when we turn to our reading from the letter to Philemon we're catapulted into a world we can't really understand, though sadly today there are still many cases of people being trafficked into modern-day slavery. We no doubt recoil at the idea of Christians, let alone Church leaders like Philemon, having slaves, but it was the norm in that society.

Paul makes his plea for Onesimus based on emotion rather than arguing against the evilness of slavery as an institution. Onesimus has been useful to Paul in prison, he has been close to Paul, yet Paul is moved to return him to his master. Paul had hoped to keep Onesimus to assist him, but, he doesn't want to do so without Philemon's permission. Paul hopes that he may be accepted back as a “beloved brother” rather than as a slave and he promises to pay any debts and asks that Onesimus be received with the same love and honour as if he, himself, returned. We might hope that the great apostle Paul who wrote of there being no longer slave or freed, Jew or Gentile, in the community of Christ, would do more to combat slavery itself but Paul, as one person, currently in jail, could not overturn the economic and social order of the ancient world. Instead, like a potter gently moulding the moving clay on the wheel, Paul seeks to mould Philemon. With flattery, authority, and references to their mutuality in Christ he entrusts Onesimus to Philemon's care confident that he will do the right thing.

There's much in our world that we can't change. We live with economic models that destroy the earth; our gadgets use rare earth metals; even those of us who drive electric cars don't have clean hands if we charge them with electricity produced from fossil fuels. Like Paul we're not able to overturn an entire social order but, also like him, we can seek to try and mitigate it.

So we're back where we started. Do we think we're immune from the trials and tribulations of the world? Do we think, like Jeremiah's contemporaries, that God won't let bad things happen to us? Do we think that God will step in, like a god in a Greek play, to sort out our environmental mess? If so, Jeremiah's words won't make easy reading. We can, like the Psalmist, assure ourselves that God knows us through and through but that means God also knows our weaknesses and mistakes. We must see the world as it is; we must see our society as it is. Many of us live in a fool's paradise hoping that there are technological solutions to the climate emergency; of course, much technological change will help and the move to electric cars, for example, is remarkable. Yet sea levels continue to rise, weather patterns continue to change, populations continue to move, and species continue to go extinct. These are not signs of God's displeasure but signs of what we, humanity, have done to nature.

Paul could not change the world overnight, however, his letter to Philemon tried to mitigate against its excesses in at least one case. Jeremiah preached to a people of the error of their ways, the Psalmist spoke directly to God and Paul spoke just to one person, Philemon. Each tried to bring about change. What can we do and who can we speak to to bring about change for the better?

Hymn God in his love for us lent us this planet R&S 85

Lord's Supper

We remember, as we do at every communion service, the gift of the life and death of God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Come to this table, all who hunger for justice.

Come to this table, all who desire to know themselves better.

Come to this table, all who desire change.

Come and be fed by God's own hand through Creation's gifts.

The Lord be with you.

Lift up your hearts.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

And also with you.

We lift them to the Lord.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

We bring You our thanks and praise for You, O God, are holy and one.

Before the ages You called the worlds into being,

causing the stars to shine, the planets to spin, and all life to start.

From the depths to the heights, You hold all Creation in love.

From the sea to the earth, through gentle wind and refining fire You tend all created things.

You called humanity into being, commanding us to care for, and live in harmony with, Creation.

Yet we rejected Your instructions preferring pillage to nurture, destruction to dignity.

From the nations of the earth, You called a people to be Your own,

to them You gave precious law, called forth judges to protect the weak,

and charged prophets to speak Your warnings.

In the fullness of time, You became one with them, one with us,

and took on our flesh and frailty in Jesus Christ.

Jesus taught the crowds, healed the sick, freed the captives and lifted the downtrodden.

For speaking truth to power, he was condemned by lies.
For showing love to the outcast, he was driven out by hatred.
For healing the sick, he was broken.
For showing how to live the heights of abundant life, he was laid low and killed.
But You did not leave him amongst the dead, You raised Jesus as the first victor over sin and death.
For all these things we praise You and with all of Creation we sing of Your holiness and glory:

**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

Gracious God, You have fed us, as a mother feeds her children, with Creation's fullness.
You have blessed us to be a blessing to others; You have filled us that we may feed the hungry;
You have loved us that we may love the loveless.
Send us out as signs of love and wholeness in a broken hurting world. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Where can we go from your Spirit, O God? For you knew us before we were even born.
You hem us in, behind and before, and lay your hands upon us.
And so, as a people surrounded by Your loving kindness, we bring our prayers to You.

First, we pray for freedom for our world, held captive by economic systems
which exploit and oppress the poor, and pillage the earth, our fragile home;
we ask for Your strength to speak out against injustice
that Your people, and the very earth itself, might be free.

We pray for our nations, longing for change,
that the hungry be fed, the homeless housed,
the jobless employed, the disabled treated with dignity,
the old given security, that we may live in peace with our neighbours.

We pray for the Church, that we do not fall into the trap of believing
You will do what we command, but that, instead, we remain faithful to Your covenant,
by seeking to love You and our neighbours as ourselves.
Reform us, O God, as a potter reforms the clay,
keep us pliable to Your will, useful in Your service, and humble as we serve.
In the silence We pray for those we love and care about and for ourselves and our own needs...

Lord's Prayer

Hymn God of freedom R&S 625

Blessing (inspired by Psalm 139)

Wherever you go this week, know this:

God knows you better than you know yourself.

No matter where you go or what you do,

God is already there, surrounding you with mercy and guiding you with love.

So go with joy and confidence, knowing that God goes with you.

And the blessing of God the Sustainer, Jesus the Redeemer,

and the peace of the Holy Spirit be with you now and ever more. Amen

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