

Sunday 17th May 2020

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, though separate let us worship together in God.

Hymn Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
 in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
 most blessed, most glorious, the Ardent of Days,
 almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

 Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
 nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
 thy justice like mountains, high soaring above
 thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

 To all life thou givest, to both great and small;
 in all life thou livest, the true life of all;
 we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree,
 and wither and perish-but naught changeth thee.

 Great Father of glory: O help us to see
 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.
 And so let thy glory, Almighty, impart,
 through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

 W. CHALMERS SMITH (1824-1908)*

Prayer

Loving God, deep within creation we find you, deep within our hearts we hear you, and we thank you.

Your glory shines in the morning, as the sun rises over the horizon, heralding a new day, a new start, trumpeting an invitation to all creation to work together, in love and with love.

As light reflects on a droplet of dew, the treasure of our world is reflected, an image of intricate and wonderful nature, a tiny portrait of your love, and we thank you.

As our day begins, your provision evident in our food and our families and the opportunities the day will bring to practise love, we leave behind yesterday and focus on today, and we thank you.

In all our living and loving this day, may we sense your presence and know your love, and feel one with you and all people. Amen.

The Lord's prayer

Readings Acts 17:22-31
 John 14:15-21

Story re-telling of a traditional story

When the world was first formed, legend has it, God chose to hide himself within the creation, but could not decide where he should hide. He wanted to be found but not too quickly as he knew the searching was an important part of the finding. He consulted with the angels who gave it some thought and then made suggestions.

Deep in the earth was the first suggestion but God knew that though it would take a little time the people he had created would evolve and eventually they would mine the earth for its treasures and he would be found too quickly.

On the moon was the next suggestion but again God knew that although it would take a little longer his people would eventually discover space travel and they would arrive at the moon and find him too soon.

Feeling defeated, the angels went quiet until one suddenly shouted – I know, why not hide yourself within their own hearts, they won't think of looking there! God smiled, "of course", he said. So, God hides within our hearts until we have grown enough in our spirit and understanding to make the pilgrimage into our own being where we discover God and our oneness.

Hymn

You are here O God, you are here,
here within us God, you are here,
all around us God, you are here.
In you we are one.

In our praying God, you are here,
words and silence, God, you are here,
when we doubt O God, you are here.
In you we are one.

In our singing God, you are here,
in our sighing God, you are here,
in our laughter God, you are here.
In you we are one.

When we're sad, O God, you are here,
when we're glad, O God, you are here,
good or bad, O God, you are here.
In you we are one.

When we're generous you are here,
when we hoard too much, you are here,
when we give our love, you are here.
In you we are one.

You are here O God, you are here,
here within us God, you are here,
all around us God, you are here.
In you we are one.

Heather Whyte 2018

Tune Kum ba yah.

Reflection

In Acts 17 Paul has been exploring Athens, famous for its profusion of religious images, and found at least one alter dedicated to the 'Unknown God'. He uses this as a starting point as he addresses the Athenians, saying let me introduce you to this God you don't know. I wonder how you would introduce God in similar circumstances. There are as many different understandings of God as there are religions and yet deep down within me is the real feeling that we are all worshipping the same God, just expressing it differently.

Jane Church, in her poem 'Yes' (Inner Wellies) asks the question do you see God as No or Yes, do you see God as controlling and denying, or as encouraging and affirming of our hopes and dreams and life itself? Elsewhere she says, '*God is the invisible heartbeat of the world*'. John O'Donohue in his

book *Divine Beauty* says, *God is pure verb, a permanent event, an eternal surge, a total quickening.* Our understanding of God has evolved as humanity has evolved and the journey goes on.

5000 years ago, before religion, God was inherently about creation and the whole of life. Then humanity evolved, we began to fashion tools and to control the land and in doing so we saw ourselves as separate. Then religion came along and built on the notion of separation and our understanding of God changed. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition there have been key points in the journey.

For Abraham, God was one of many Gods, a 'house God' carried from place to place; a God who sometimes appeared in human form as one, or even three, men.

For Moses, God was a fearsome character but not yet omnipotent, Pharaoh's magicians were sometimes a match for God; God was still a tribal God living in a tent, then later in Solomon's Temple.

During the Babylonian exile, God's people were exposed to the concept of dualism, good and evil. Then in the period 600 – 300 BCE there was a leap in human consciousness and polytheism gave way to monotheism. There was one God.

As Christianity developed the concept of the trinity evolved, out of the necessity to explain Jesus and the place of the Spirit. Throughout all of this has been an understanding that the Gods have intervened in the lives of humanity and the life of creation. Today that understanding is being re-examined by some as we begin another evolutionary step in our understanding of self and God. We are seeing a new term arise panentheism - the idea that God is in everything and everything is in God. We might think this is new and yet the idea has been around a long time and there are references within the Bible, indeed within our two passages today. In Acts 17 Paul says, 'God is not far from each one of... in him we live and move and have our being.' In John 14 says, 'You know him (God) because he abides with you and he will be in you.... I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you'. In the 13th Century, Mechtild of Magdeburg said, 'The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw and knew; I saw all things in God and God in all things.'

How do we experience this? Jesus says we experience this through the spirit, through the creative force that unites all beings. The disciples experienced a new presence of Jesus after the resurrection. It was an experience that stayed with them. The Spirit of God was not a new concept, in Genesis we read of the Spirit of God like a wind hovering over creation. However, Jesus is introducing a new dimension, a personal experience of the Spirit. Through this Spirit we will understand our humanity differently.

One of my favourite films is *Chocolat*; in the film the wind blows open the church doors. Perhaps an attempt by the Holy Spirit to open up and renew the congregation? But the Conte de Reynaud bolts the doors against the wind. For all his devotion, he cannot (until the end) accept the work of the Holy Spirit, because he craves order and tranquillity above all - even above the work of the Spirit. It is the wind who blows Vianne and Anouk into town, and it is Vianne who breathes new life into the community-even into the Conte! Vianne sees the world differently, there is an indigenous understanding within her work with chocolate.

Sometimes we can become so absorbed in the theory of God that we forget to relate to God. If we are not connecting then we are not listening to the spirit at work in our lives and in creation. We are not learning, and have stopped evolving, stopped growing into the fullness of our humanity. Stopped trying to understand one another.

Jesus promises the disciples three things: Life will not be easy, they will never be alone, in the end all will be well. He promises this because he knows, in his place within God, that the whole universe is on a journey towards justice and peace.

How will this happen? Through the evolving of humanity in its understanding of self, creation and the oneness that is the Spirit of God. This evolution comes through judgment, Paul mentions this, Jesus mentions this. However, when we hear the word judgment we immediately think of condemnation and punishment, the word in biblical times was far more complex and meant putting things right, creating balance, harmony and well-being; it was restorative justice rather than punitive justice. If we learn to listen to that still small voice that urges us to our best action rather than a lesser action we are playing a part in restoring justice. Paul mentions the purifying effect of fire but it is not the fire of hell, it is not a fire that consumes all before it, it is a fire that restores by removing that which is less than good.

If we build our lives using shoddy materials then we will be left with little of value and we will experience a sense of loss, regret and remorse. If we build our lives with acts of kindness, caring for others and sharing with others, we may be surprised at what is left and experience a real sense of joy. When we understand this, it affects the way we live our lives, we begin to live as if we know we are in God, know that the Spirit is moving. We use what we have to help other – our wealth to make others rich, our power to empower the powerless. We will give and keep on giving, and in the process receive much ourselves.

Living in this way we begin to see all things differently, even our trials take on a new significance. In the film *Evan Almighty*, Evan's wife encounters a stranger who she finds offers a new perspective – when she asked for patience she was given opportunities to practice patience. In the same way we can view delays as opportunities to practice patience, annoyances as opportunities to become less selfish, hard work as opportunities to serve others more fully.

When we live believing in the presence of God within us, believing in the journey of restorative justice, we will no longer live in fear. We live in love. As we journey to become more fully human, more like Jesus, we seek to be more loving, more understanding, more at peace with ourselves and with others.

Life is not easy but it gives us a wealth of opportunities to grow and we are never alone, the Spirit of creation is working with us, through us and within us. In the end, all will be well. That is all we can know for now, and all we need to know. It is enough, to know God is eternal life and that is a huge adventure.

Prayer

Take a moment to consider all the things that appear to separate us from others and reflect on why things might feel that way.

Loving God, life is hard at the moment, we feel afraid, and adrift, cut off from our normal lives, and yet, in the depth of despair we know you are there, holding us, loving us and leading us forward. As communities begin to explore a new way of being, help us to be beacons of hope, reflecting your love, nurturing hope through actions and words, and offering kindness to those who we share our lives with and those who are serving us in this time of crisis.

Loving God we are one in you and in creation, nothing can separate us from you or each other in the oneness that is life, may we always seek to build bridges where there appear barriers, to reach out

rather than closing in, to be open to new ways and new people, discovering more of you in each encounter.

Loving God within our hurting world you are love, may we be love today, tomorrow and every day, may we be more than our limited understanding of our humanity, may we embrace oneness and create with you a world of justice, compassion and peace. Respecting creation and nurturing the life of our planet, may we find new ways of living in harmony building a future that is stable and secure for all people. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Hymn

Praise God, creator,
source of all being,
present around us,
and deep within.

When we are open,
accepting and loving,
we find connections,
journeys begin.

Praise God in singing,
dancing and playing,
showing God's wonders
through every word.
Exploring ideas,
new paths revealing,
journeys continue,
Spirit is heard.

Praise God for journeys,
leading us onward,
leading us inward,
broadening sight.

Praise God for loving
all of creation,
sustaining our living
providing our light.

Praise God in all things,
never forgetting,
love builds and fosters
oneness in all.

We are together,
held in creation,
bound in the Spirit,
part of the whole.

Heather Whyte 2020

Tune Bunessan (Morning has broken)

Blessing

May the blessing that is the knowledge of God, source of all being, the love of God discovered through Jesus and the inspiration of the Spirit which binds us together be with us on our journey this day and every day. Amen.