

Sunday 3rd 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 Who would true valour see,
 let him come hither;
 one here will constant be,
 come wind, come weather;
 there's no discouragement
 shall make him once relent
 his first avowed intent
 to be a pilgrim.

 Who so beset him round
 with dismal stories,
 do but themselves confound;
 his strength the more is.
 No lion can him fright,
 he'll with a giant fight,
 but he will have a right
 to be a pilgrim.

 Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
 can daunt his spirit;
 he knows he at the end
 shall life inherit.
 Then fancies fly away,
 he'll fear not what men say,
 he'll labour night and day
 to be a pilgrim.

 JOHN BUNYAN (1628-88)

Prayer

Eternal God, source of all being, in you we find our true inner peace and we can depend on you.

You are like a mighty rock that keeps us safe, like a fortress where we feel secure, and even though the world throws its worst in our direction in you we are one and always will be, and the world cannot change that fact.

We can trust in you and share our deepest concerns in safety.

We are human, nothing more than a breath, all of us together weigh less than a puff of air, and in our mortality, there is no true greatness. In our oneness we know that violence serves no purpose, that dishonesty leads to despair and great wealth is as fleeting as life on earth.

Deep within our souls we know the two great truths, you are all powerful and you are all loving, you are the source of all being and your graciousness is beyond human measure.

We praise you and thank you for your creativity which is all around us, and your love which encompasses us wherever we are and whatever we do.

The Lord's prayer

Readings	Acts 2:42-47 John 10:1-10
Hymn	<p>The King of love my Shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never; I nothing lack if I am his and he is mine for ever.</p> <p>Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul he leadeth, and where the verdant pastures grow with food celestial feedeth.</p> <p>Perverse and foolish oft I strayed, but yet in love he sought me, and on his shoulder gently laid, and home, rejoicing, brought me.</p> <p>In death's dark vale I fear no ill with thee, dear Lord, beside me; thy rod and staff my comfort still, thy cross before to guide me.</p> <p>Thou spread'st a table in my sight, thy unction grace bestoweth; and O what transport of delight from thy pure chalice floweth!</p> <p>And so through all the length of days thy goodness faileth never; Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise within thy house for ever.</p> <p>H. W. BAYER (1821-77)</p>

Reflection

Our passage from Acts has become familiar within many Methodist and United Reformed churches, it is the passage at the heart of the Holy Habits exercise. It is a brief definition of the earliest church and in bullet points it says-

- Devote yourselves to the teaching of those set apart to lead you
- Live in fellowship
- Be in communion with one another
- Pray together
- Share all things, providing for those in need from the common purse
- Praise God
- Have goodwill to all people

Do this and your words and actions will bring others into fellowship, welcome them.

We often feel that we need to get back to or recreate what the early church had and there is no doubt that the essence of what those early Christians practised is important. Normally, we might look at this list and go tick yes, tick yes, but things are not normal, and we are being challenged to find new and creative ways to express the fellowship we have and to tick these boxes.

Reading the bible is important but the early church did more than that, they sat together with their leader and learnt by discussion and sharing thoughts. Whilst we cannot meet together there are other ways that we can share our thoughts on a passage.

We can pray, and even pray together by using the same prayers but it is not the same as being together to pray.

We can and do praise God and I believe we are in communion with one another, but we are struggling to find ways of living together in fellowship when we are isolated. Phone calls are brilliant, but they are a two-way conversation rather than the togetherness with which we are familiar.

So, how can we explore this new situation creatively? Perhaps we need to look at it differently?

Our reading from John is really two readings, part one (verses 1-5) is the closest John gets to a parable. We are told Jesus spoke this parable to them, but they did not understand. So, what was the story, it is a story about sheep and their characteristic of recognising the voice of the one who cares for them and feeds them. It is an instinct in most animals, our dogs can tell when a car belonging to one of us drives up to the house, and they follow Norman avidly as he feeds and walks them, if he leaves the house without them Bartleby will whine for quite a few minutes and then reluctantly settle but he is on constant alert for Norman returning. I think those listening would have understood this part of the story well enough, so what else do we have? Two things, a reminder that thieves very rarely use the front door and the that shepherds lead and don't chase. What would you make of that story? Personally, I think it is a bit muddled.

In the second part, we hear that Jesus has a second attempt at explaining his point. Listen he says, I am the gate – note not the shepherd but the gate, and the gate not the gateway. This is probably a reference to the way shepherds would often lie down in the gateway to protect the sheep during the night from thieves. Those who have come before were thieves. I am not sure who Jesus means the crowd to identify with the thieves but he experienced many different types of leadership in his lifetime from revolutionaries and rebels to those who would sell out to the prevailing forces and his attitude to the ways and methods of the scribes and pharisees might also be a clue. This passage is about kingship in biblical terms. The King was the ruler but where we hear ruler and think power, the CEO of a big company, the president of a bank or multinational corporation sitting behind a desk completely unconnected to the average employee, in biblical terms the ruler, or ideal king, is seen as a shepherd. Someone who has a real relationship with the people, someone they recognise and admire enough to respond with their heart and follow where led. Follow along the path to life in all its fullness. In this passage John is explaining why Jesus should be seen as a king and why so many had already followed along the path, the disciples and others attracted by the style of Jesus leadership.

It is the path we seek to follow but life can throw a curved ball. Life can become a slow walk along a long path or life can be a pilgrimage. There has been a resurgence in the interest in pilgrimage and thousands flock to walk the Camino, or journey to the Holy Land to follow the footsteps of Jesus follow the travels of Paul. Millions of Muslims make a pilgrimage to Mecca, and Hindus journey to the river Ganges. However, in many respects the destination is less important than the journey, TS Elliot puts it this way 'the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know it for the first time'. It is a bit like Dorothy's adventure in Oz, when she returned to Kansas, she saw it in a completely different light. Pilgrimage often takes us to the edge places, takes us from the familiar into an exploration of the unknown, but the journey is rarely about the physical so much as a change in consciousness, we become more aware. It is not so much where we pilgrimage but that we pilgrimage. One of the products of pilgrimage is an evolution of consciousness, a realisation that it's not about where we are in terms of place and time, but our awareness of God wherever and whenever that matters. Our outer journey, in whatever form, takes us deeper within ourselves to the inner chamber to which Jesus leads.

We are on a pilgrimage as people of faith, a pilgrimage to discover afresh what it means to follow Jesus without the trappings of an orthodox church, the confines of a particular building and the heritage of 'we have always done it this way'. We cannot do it that way at the moment, and things may change forever. That is a frightening thought but so is setting out to walk hundreds of miles

across unknown paths, and we are following the way of Jesus. The early church set out to discover a new way of being and that is where we are now, and we share the same faith and trust in God. So as we seek a new way of being church we must practice being people of the way, more aware of our surroundings and more engaged with each other so that we can find a new definition of church for a new era. We have a calling to live and pass on our experience to others that they may live and pass on their experience in turn; that is tradition, a stage on the journey for a particular moment, before turning the next corner or climbing the next peak and discovering a new stage for a new time.

To the Pilgrim

Set out!

You were born for the road.

Set out!

You have a meeting to keep.

Where? With whom?

Perhaps with yourself.

Set out!

Your steps will be your words -

The road your song,

the weariness your prayers.

And at the end

your silence will speak to you.

Set out!

Alone, or with others -

but get out of yourself!

You have created rivals -

you will find companions.

You envisaged enemies -

you will find brothers and sisters.

Set out!

Your head does not know

where your feet are leading your heart.

Set out!

You were born for the road -

the pilgrim's road.

Someone is coming to meet you -

is seeking you

in the shrine at the end of the road -

in the shrine in the depths of your heart.

He is your peace.

He is your joy!

GO! God already walks with you!

Anonymous

Prayer

Open my ears to the voices around me. Help me to listen to those I journey with and those I pass on the way, to stop and actively listen to your pure voice in the voices of others.

Loving God, we are all on a journey, sometimes together and sometimes it feels as if we are all alone and the emptiness opens up a space for the frightened child within us all. At this time many of us are journeying very much apart, isolated within our homes, sometimes within a room within our

homes and loneliness and despair knock quietly at the door. Help us to sense your presence around us, encompassing us and giving us strength and courage on our journey. We are fearful when we watch the news and hear of so many who have died, when there is no end in sight to our isolation but you invite us to see this time as pilgrimage, an exploration of your presence with us and your strength within us. So, in hope and in faith we step out boldly on our pilgrimage and learn to see you and hear you in the voices and experiences all around us, and we learn to share with those we meet on the way in whatever context, the delivery man, the phone call, the friend, neighbour or family member who waves through the window or who we join with on the doorstep appreciation of those who care so bravely.

We are in this together, a world united in a new and strange way. As we journey help us to be open to the voices of strangers with whom we are one, in you, and in this situation. People near and far who are hungry or homeless, powerless or voiceless, bruised and battered by life, people like us, who may be fearful about tomorrow in ways we can only begin to imagine. As the world closes down may our generosity flower in an overflowing of love for brothers and sisters caught in the worst of circumstances, who feel abandoned by the world. May we, who know the oneness of your love, reach out creatively to share with our companions on the way that all may know of you and your gracious love. In Jesus name Amen

Hymn We are people on a journey,
 through the world of love and fear,
 drawing strength from knowing Jesus
 and his message 'God is near'.

 God unites us on our journey,
 leading us on paths unknown,
 showing wonders unimagined,
 by our side, not on a throne.

 One with us and with all people,
 God embodies, Christ is light;
 by his openness and sharing
 giving wisdom and new sight.

 So we gather to encourage
 one another on the way.
 Through our living and our loving
 showing Jesus every day.

 Children on the way of Jesus,
 pilgrims guided by a star,
 called to love and share our treasures
 with all people, near and far.

 Heather Whyte 2016
 (tune Servant Song R&S 474)

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.