

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020

**Before you sit down to worship try and find a small pebble, from a path or the garden and bring it to worship with a small bowl of water and a piece of tissue or wash cloth.**

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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                    Angel voices ever singing  
                              round thy throne of light,  
                              angel harps for ever ringing  
                              rest not day nor night;  
                              thousands only live to bless thee,  
                              and confess thee, Lord of might.

                              Lord, we know that thou rejoicest  
                              o'er each work of thine;  
                              thou didst ears and hands and voices  
                              for thy praise design;  
                              craftsman's art and music's measure  
                              for thy pleasure all combine.

                              In thy house, great God, we offer  
                              of thine own to thee,  
                              and for thine acceptance proffer,  
                              all unworthily,  
                              hearts and minds and hands and voices,  
                              in our choicest psalmody.

                              Honour, glory, might and merit  
                              thine shall ever be,  
                              Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
                              blessed Trinity;  
                              of the best that thou hast given  
                              earth and heaven render thee.

                              FRANCIS POTT (1832-1909) altd.

Prayer

Eternal God, source of all being, in you we are, may we always remember this.

Our strength comes from oneness, from our connection with you; in this connection is all wisdom and knowledge, freedom and belonging. It is in this oneness that we trust.

In the world around us many people have yet to discover this connectedness and in its place they seek possessions and wealth to define their identity, in oneness we have all we need, for you know us and love us and we need not fear. Our bodies are frail, but life is eternal.

In the world we have imagined there are many sorrows and it is easy to despair, we can feel lost and alone, invisible to others and sometimes threatened, but when we remember the oneness we trust in, we know we belong, we are loved and will be for all time in your presence. This knowledge brings us joy and we find hope and peace in its completeness.

We praise you for your love beyond earthly measure.  
We praise you for the eternal life of oneness.  
We praise you for the creation in which we have our being.  
The Lord's prayer

Readings      Acts 7:55-60  
                    John 14:1-14, 27

Hymn            Come my Way, my Truth, my Life:  
                    such a Way, as gives us breath:  
                    such a Truth, as ends all strife:  
                    such a Life, as killeth death.

                    Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:  
                    such a Light, as shows a feast:  
                    such a Feast, as mends in length:  
                    such a Strength, as makes his guest.

                    Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:  
                    such a Joy, as none can move:  
                    such a Love, as none can part:  
                    such a Heart, as joys in love.

                    GEORGE HERBERT (1593-1633)

Story    *One of the things I have missed is sharing stories with you, so this week here is a traditional story, the author is unknown.*

Once there was a Native American chief who was nearing the end of his life. He had three sons and even though he had tried many times, he was not able to decide which of his sons should succeed him as chief.

In a last attempt one day, he gathered his sons together and said to them, 'Do you see that mountain in the distance? I want you to journey to that mountain, climb to its summit and bring back the thing you think will be most helpful in leading our people.' The sons departed.

After several days, the first son returned with a load of flint stones, used to make arrow tips and spear points. He told his father, 'Our people will never live in fear of their enemies. I know where there is a mound of flint.'

The second son climbed to the top of the mountain, and on the way found forests rich with wood for making fires. When he returned, he said to his father, 'Our people will never be cold in winter. I know where wood can be found in abundance to keep them warm and to cook their food.'

The third son returned late and empty-handed. He stated, 'When I got to the summit, I found nothing worth bringing back. I searched everywhere, but the top of the mountain was barren rock and useless. Then I looked out towards the horizon, far into the distance. I was astonished to see new land filled with forests and meadows, mountains and valleys, fish and animals - a land of great beauty and great peace. I brought nothing back, for the land was still far off and I did not have time to travel there. One day I would love to go there; I delayed coming back because I found it difficult to return after seeing the beauty of that land.'

The old chief's eyes blazed. He grasped his third son in his arms, proclaiming that he would succeed him as the new chief. He thought to himself, 'The other sons brought back worthy things, necessary things. But my third son has a vision. He has seen a better land, the promised land, and he burns with the desire to go there.'

## Reflection

Our reading from Acts leaves me with a question – how far would I go to defend what I believe? Steven has just delivered a long ‘history’ of God’s efforts with the people of Israel and what a chequered past they had, it is certainly full of ups and downs, two steps forward and one step back and he has done this in response to the accusation, in Acts 6 (8-15), of speaking against the Temple and the Law in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus. As we read those verses we are told that it was a put up job, a paid witness was brought in to testify falsely, Stephen is up against powers that are fighting for survival. It must have felt as if the world was against him but he sticks with it telling the story of the people in a way that makes Jesus points. It gets him nowhere and he is condemned to death, yet even then he is aware of something beyond this world and he shares his vision and as he is killed he forgives those who are killing him.

Death also features in our second reading from John, a reading which has been used too many times in the past few weeks as sad farewells have been made at cemeteries and crematoria around the country. It is a reading of great comfort at such times, a reassurance of a life beyond this life. Maybe it was a glimpse of this that Stephen saw in those last moments. Tom Wright in his commentary on the Acts passage says he is reminded of the last two verses of the poem *In No Strange Land* by Francis Thompson

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob’s ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry,—clinging to Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water,  
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!

This speaks of that moment of revelation in which Jacob saw of a ladder, adorned with angels travelling between earth and heaven. Wright suggests that it is often when we are at our lowest point that we catch the truest glimpse of God, wherever we are.

The disciples were feeling low, they were confused, so Jesus attempts to reassure them with a picture of the life after. He takes a familiar motif, a house with many rooms, enough for everyone and he says trust me, this is prepared for you and if it wasn’t would I have told you I have prepared a place for you? Sometimes, even when things are supposed to be simple it is hard to get your head around it, and Thomas the questioner, asks what they are all thinking – how can we know the way when we don’t know where you are going. Then comes a verse that has probably been more misquoted than any other verse – the only way to the Father is through me. The Father is one aspect of the trinity which is an expression of our understanding of God, the term Father and God are not quite the same thing and when we interchange them as often happens with this verse we corrupt the message of Jesus. I prefer to understand this as the only way to understand God as Father is through the teaching of Jesus, but the teaching of Jesus is not the only way to understand God. I have also pondered often on the grammar of the ‘I am’ statements. Ancient Greek was not that hot on punctuation, the meaning often being left to interpreting the nuances of time, place and tense. What happens if you put a comma, after ‘I am’? ‘I am’ was after all the answer Moses received when he asked who he should say had sent him. If there was a comma then we could read this as God, the way, the truth and the life, or God, the shepherd, the vine etc. Jesus says the Father is in him and he is in the Father, in other words they are one, the concept of which we are only now fully understanding through the revelation of quantum science. Within the concept of the trinity the Father and Jesus are two aspects of God along with the Spirit. We often refer to the trinity as three in one so I believe it is really important to remember this when referring to this passage of John.

There have been too many low points recently many stemming from death but also many stemming from loneliness. Self-isolation is no picnic, it is at best a disruption to life and at its worst it is a place of despair. Aloneness is an interesting phenomenon; as Paul Tillich puts it, there are two sides to being alone – loneliness, a word which expresses the pain of being alone, and solitude which expresses the glory of being alone. The latter is a choice, the former is often not of our choosing. There was already too much loneliness in the world and now there is more. For many people the despair of loneliness is hard to overcome, and they slip deeper and deeper into depression. For others loneliness is one way of looking at self-isolation, but perhaps there is another way. Perhaps we can re-express the situation as Stephen sought to re-express the history of the Jewish tradition.

Lockdown also had two sides – for many now working from home, or still working but balancing childcare, there is a sense of more demands on their time, resulting in less time for themselves; for others there are now fewer demands on their time which has resulted in too much time for themselves and too much time to think. This has been a sudden change with no time to prepare and balance is needed in both situations. For the person suddenly faced with more demands it is important to use whatever time they have to practise being rather than doing; to teach being, and example being. Many children are so used to having all their time accounted for with school and after school activities, then sport at the weekend, that they have never been taught how to be on their own, to fill their own time without resorting to phones and electronic gadgetry, we can use this time to ‘example’ being, finding new hobbies or rediscovering childhood hobbies long forgotten, doing some of this together but also encouraging individual exploration. For the person with too much time creativity may be the answer, there are many ways to explore our creativity – cooking, making, sorting, writing, reading, listening. What is important is the balance and putting a structure to the day which encourages exploration of identity. Perhaps the most important aspect is connections, reaching out to others in our shared isolation. Aloneness is after all al-oneness. We are in this together and we can encourage one another wherever we are. Just as we clap together on Thursdays, we can be creative in other ways to build our connectivity. I heard recently of people in Harpenden who play and instrument organising themselves into a street ensemble, everyone playing ‘What a wonderful world’ together, and of course the voice is an instrument, so no-one was excluded. There is a wonderful video of the occasion. Others are using Zoom to have coffee together or arranging conference calls between friends. It is, as Stephen said, all about how you look at things, whether that is death, or after, we are called to be confident in our faith and live our belief with confidence. Peter talks about us being ‘living stones’, the church is not about building made of stone, whether a church or a temple, it is not about creeds and doctrine, it is about people working together to make a difference in the lives of others.

Lockdown is forcing our exploration of a new way of being, for most of us thankfully that new way does not yet involve death, but it is no less traumatic as we face radical changes in the way we live together, at least for the near future, but we have a vision of a better land.

Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” How far would I go – I do not know but I like to think I would give it my best shot. If you are struggling in self-isolation please do reach out, we are all there for each other and there are excellent resources available to support those who are struggling. You are not alone.

Prayer - using our stone and the water.

Take your stone and hold it in your palm, explore it with your fingers:

Does it have any natural cracks or holes? – often dirt can collect in cracks and holes, is there stuff sticking to your life that is hiding the true you? Offer this to God, recognising that God always forgives and accepts us as we are, whilst wanting us to be the best we can be. Think about getting rid of the things that make you less than your best self. Commit to accepting others as they are recognising that life throws dirt at all of us.

Does your stone have any sparkly bits – maybe little bits of quartz, or minerals? Think about the sparkly bits in your life, times of celebration or achievement. These are a part of you also, take a moment to give thanks. Think about the things you value in others and find a way of telling them.

What does your stone feel like, is it hard and unyielding like flint or crumblier, more giving? What do you feel like and how might others describe you, have you become a bit unyielding, hardened yourself off because of too many knocks to lessen the hurt? Think about Stephen and Jesus who had a firmness of belief but still reached out in love to others and make a commitment to balance your approach. Recognise that sometimes circumstances make others seem hard.

Consider how smooth your stone is, has it been washed smooth by the sea? Sometimes we say life knocks off the rough edges, how have you allowed yourself to be changed by life? Do you see this a positive?

Is the stone damaged, chipped or broken? Stones, like us, are rarely perfect, we get bashed about a bit by life and there are little tell-tale signs that we have been hurt, but that is a part of who we are. Think about your marks and remember that you are loved by God, as you are, and nothing can keep you from that love. Commit to recognising where others are hurt by our actions and the actions of government and find ways to support them.

Peter said that we are like living stones, we may feel cracked or tired, feel that we don't fit or are too damaged yet we are a part of creation, part of the glory of God and we are being built into a spiritual house. We are important and valued, we are worthy.

Now place your stone into the water then explore it again. How has it changed. When we allow God's love to wash over us, we are changed, and God's glory is revealed within us.

Make a commitment to build connections with others and to live in the love of God, being the best you can be in that moment and place, and seeing the best in others. Amen

Hymn                      Longing for light, we wait in darkness.  
You can find a recording of this song, with words, at  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJq3bhdgQoc>

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### 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.