

Sunday 2nd August 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.

Suggested Hymn Immortal Invisible

Prayer

Eternal God, the wonders of your creation surround us, all around are reminders of your love and care, and every day, as we wonder at your love for us, the recognition of our place in creation and our place in you grows. In you is our strength and our hope, in you is all love.

Recognising your presence around and within us, your love can overcome our fear, for in you we are eternally safe and nothing in this world can change that. You are throughout all time and space, there is no moment that it not you and we praise you for your wondrous being

As we gather in your presence, we bring our praise and thanksgiving. You know our deepest thoughts and desires, even before we are consciously aware ourselves, but in our prayers we share and reflect and in your love we move forward inspired by your Spirit, and following the Christ.

For this new day with all its opportunities we give you thanks, for the wonders of technology which allow us to be together even though we are apart we give you thanks, for the love and care of friends and strangers we give you thanks, for your church and the example of Jesus we give you thanks, that we are eternally held within your care we give you thanks.

The Lord's prayer

Reading

Psalm 121

Hymn

I to the hills will lift mine eyes.
From whence doth come mine aid?
My safety cometh from the Lord,
who heaven and earth hath made.

Tune Dundee

Thy foot he'll not let slide, nor will
he slumber that thee keeps.
Behold, he that keeps Israel,
he slumbers not, nor sleeps.

The Lord thee keeps, the Lord thy shade
on thy right hand doth stay:
the moon by night thee shall not smite,
nor yet the sun by day.

The Lord shall keep thy soul ; he shall
preserve thee from all ill.
Henceforth thy going out and in
God keep for ever will.

Psalm 121
The Scottish Psalter; 1929

Readings

Genesis 32:22-31
Matthew 14:13-21

Reflection

Being a follower of the way of Jesus is not without its challenges. Believing in God is not without its challenges, particularly when experience contradicts the beliefs that you have been taught. That is why it is so important to reflect and build your own relationship with God based on a belief that reflects the world and time in which we live. As we explored last week our understanding of heaven has changed greatly from the biblical understanding but that does not have to undermine our relationship with God. Many today want certainty, but the fixed creeds and doctrines, whilst giving that certainty, also leave us open to the devastation of what happens when your certainty does not fit your experience and you are left doubting the very existence of God.

Jacob did not doubt God, but his relationship was built on guilt and the knowledge that he had cheated his own brother out of his birth right. Our story today takes place when Jacob is on his way to meet his brother Esau, and he is not looking forward to it, he is worried that Esau will want revenge. He splits his entourage and sends them on ahead and then he settles down for the night, but it is not a peaceful night and the story tells of wrestling and pain, but Jacob will not give in and asks a blessing from his opponent. This is given, and in the words he hears Jacob recognises the voice of God. Jacob goes on to meet Esau and his fears are not realised and the reunion is all Jacob could have hoped for.

How many times have you been in a similar place, desperately worried about something and then finding it all comes out okay in the end? How many times have you had a wrestles night going over worst-case scenarios only for the day to bring peace and resolution? When we doubt ourselves, I wonder if in some way we inevitably doubt God, or at least the God we have been taught about as children? During the last few months there will have been much wrestling with God, as doubt, uncertainty and fear have collided with a taught faith. Death is often a challenge to faith and our understanding of prayer. Psalm 121 is a beautiful Psalm of realisation in the oneness and presence of God. It is a Psalm of reassurance, and our opening prayer was based on a modern understanding of our relationship with God. God is always with us, around us and within us, God knows everything but God also gives us freewill and so sometimes we have to stop and reflect on the choices we have made which bring consequences that do not always match our prayerful requests. In fact, if our prayers are only requests, a sort of shopping list for God, then we are likely to find some disappointment. Our prayers need to be a conversation, an exploration and also a commitment to the way of Jesus within our lives.

In our reading from Matthew's gospel, we have Matthew's version of a very familiar story, one of the few stories that appears in all four gospels, so we it has some significance. Matthew gospel is based on Mark's gospel with some additional material from a source known as Q and of course Matthew own twist on things. There are some interesting differences between Matthew's version and the one in Mark, it is shorter for a start, so what does he leave out? Matthew is less descriptive, he has Jesus withdrawing on his own, whilst Mark includes the disciples; when Jesus reaches his destination he finds a crowd and he has compassion and begins to heal the people, men, women and children, while Mark had Jesus seeing the crowd as 'sheep without a shepherd' and he begins to teach the crowd who we are told are all men. In both the disciples are present at the end of the day and they suggest that Jesus sends the crowd away to find food and in both Jesus challenges the disciples to find food for the crowd, an impossible challenge given the numbers we are told are present. When the disciples question this Jesus asks what they have – 5 loaves and two fish – he asks them for the food and in Mark Jesus asks the disciples to get the crowd to sit in groups of fifty and a hundred, whilst in Matthew we read that Jesus ordered the crowd to sit down on the grass. In both he blesses the food and then breaks the bread but only in Mark is the fish said to be dispensed, however in both Jesus gives the food to the disciples who then feed the crowd, and all are fed and there is plenty left.

What do we learn from this story about the way of Jesus? Jesus was tired, he had escaped a crowd to rest, and then he finds himself surrounded again yet he has compassion and responds to their needs. This is an example of selfless behaviour and drawing on strength beyond those you believe

you have at the time. The disciples recognised the practical needs of the people, but Jesus taught them that they themselves could provide for those practical needs, even though they had so little. In the power of the Spirit, and oneness, we too may find that what we see as a little can go a long way and feed the needs of many, practically and metaphorically. Jesus worked through the disciples, he gave to them so they could give to others, the more we discover about God the more we have a responsibility to pass it on.

In our current situation there is always something to share, God's blessing, in the form of encouragement, support and conversation. As always, we need to wrestle with our own belief and understanding in order to help others wrestle with theirs. We never have all the answers, Jesus did not give direct answers, instead he shared stories to enable people, if they chose, to explore the answers that were relevant to them. Our story, our journey, may be the very things that someone else needs to hear to help them explore the answers that are relevant to them.

One final challenge from this story comes via theologian Pete Rollins. Pete has produced some parables which explore different aspects of familiar stories, as well as some which are stories for our modern world in the style of Jesus. One such story explores the feeding of the five thousand. It follows a familiar route right up to Jesus blessing and breaking the bread and passing it to the disciples, then comes the twist, Jesus and the disciples eat all the food for themselves and leave the crowd hungry. It is a shocking tale. It disturbs us because of course Jesus would not do that, would he? Pete comments that it is shocking but according to scripture the presence of Christ in the world is meant to be encountered in the presence of those who gather in his name. In very real terms many people learn of Jesus through those who claim to live the way of Jesus. This is very challenging to those of us who live in the west, perhaps we need to stop and think through this story some more. Covid 19 has brought us together and we give thanks that we live in a part of the world where good healthcare is the norm, but how can we as Christians demonstrate the presence of Christ for those who are trapped in a very different system yet are facing the same disease? As the disciples showed when faced with an overwhelming crowd, we can recognise the practical need but with the help of the Spirit we can also work together to provide for that need.

Prayers of concern and commitment

Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, we lift our eyes to the hills seeking your power and strength from the depths of our struggles. As your mountains encircle the valleys, so your hope encircles our despair. You call to us, 'have faith, have hope, fear not for I am with you now and always and my love surrounds you.'

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

Mountains are not smooth places, they are steep and craggy, their surface can be slippery and catch out the unwary, but you call us to climb and explore. Loving God all around us feels rough and craggy at the moment, and every day can bring new challenges and new fears, yet in our faith we step out and explore a new world.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

Moses climbed your mountains to hear your voice so that he could lead people, Jacob wrestled in the valley, we are inspired by both and know that you are present all around on mountain tops and in valleys, you are always with us, in every moment waking or asleep.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

As we rest in your presence may your love fill our hearts with new wonder and encourage us to new ways through the example of Jesus. Shake us when our actions sadden you, when we are tempted to put ourselves first, to grab more than we need and when our fear for ourselves overcomes our love for others.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

Inspire us to look around and see those who accompany us on the journey and those we pass on the way. Open our eyes to the homeless, the hungry, the lost and the despairing and through our faith may we reach out in creative ways to make a difference with sharing hearts, encouraging words, and real practical help.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

With faith we can move mountains. In faith we pray for your world, for integrity in leadership, compassion in government and Love in decision-making. In faith we pray for your church, the physical presence of the Christ in our world, may we seek the Kingdom together, respecting one another and sharing all that we have with those who have need.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope.

In faith we pray for our communities, as different from each other as we are from each other, yet born together in the hand of your creation. We are all your children; we are held together in your oneness and in that oneness is eternal life. For all the future may bring and offer we trust in you.

May our faith in you grow and reveal new hope, and may others recognize your love in our actions. Amen

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, let us pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church by continuing to send our offering and exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know God's blessing on all we do. Amen

Hymn

In heavenly love abiding,
no change my heart shall fear;
and safe is such confiding,
for nothing changes here:
the storm may roar without me,
my heart may low be laid,
but God is round about me,
and can I be dismayed?

Tune Penlan

Wherever he may guide me,
no want shall turn me back;
my Shepherd is beside me,
and nothing can I lack:
his wisdom ever waketh,
his sight is never dim;
he knows the way he taketh,
and I will walk with him.

Green pastures are before me,
which yet I have not seen;
bright skies will soon be o'er me,
where darkening clouds have been:
my hope I cannot measure,
my path to life is free;
my Saviour has my treasure,
and he will walk with me.

ANNA L. WARING (1823-1910)*

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.