

Sunday 5th July 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 Based on Psalm 145

Eternal God, I will talk of you always;

every day I will thank you and wonder at your awesome majesty.

You are always there, within my life, within my being.

Generation to generation we discover your awesome might and praise you. We meditate on your presence in creation, from the heights to the depths, from the awe-inspiring mountain to the intricacy of the atom, all held together in the power of the Spirit.

Creation provides for the needs of all people, for all people are within your creation, within you.

In you is love, unending, unconditional love. In you is grace and forgiveness.

Let creation be thankful. Let all people honour the bond of creation, recognising your eternal power and growing in oneness within your love.

In your love we are held fast.

When our world crumbles, you are there; when our burdens are heavy, you are there.

We look to you in the eyes of a stranger and find a friend, a companion on our journey.

We hold out our hand and find it filled by the generosity of creation through the loving hearts of brothers and sisters near and far.

Eternal source of all being, you are with us always and we give thanks.

The Lord's prayer

Readings

Genesis 18:1-15

Thoughts

The 'tent' of this meeting has been the home of Abraham, Sarah and their household since they settled in Canaan, it is no mere tent but a suite of rooms. Abraham is depicted as something of a comic character who fails to recognise God, even though he is, we are told, used to speaking with

God. The tradition of the time was that women could not be present when men entertained male guests and so we realise that Sarah has once again become invisible and silent. The quantity of food prepared is extraordinary but the notion of giving all you have to unexpected guests is common in most folklore and persists within indigenous cultures today.

Abraham has still not shared with Sarah God's promise of an heir and her part within that promise. This seems especially cruel given the narrator's emphasis on her inability to have children and the desperation we see in her disastrous plan with Hagar. We are never told why Abraham has failed to tell her but maybe today's story offers a little insight. This story, for all its wrapping in the comic figure of Abraham, is all about Sarah. She may be silent and invisible but God is here for Sarah, not Abraham, although she still has to overhear the message and even the rebuke for laughing comes through Abraham.

If we ever in any doubt about the patriarchal nature of Genesis this underlines the male dominance of the culture and the likely gender of the author. The Priestly culture had no place for women, but despite this Sarah has an important role to play in God's plan. Recognising that this was written hundreds of years after the time in which it is placed this may hint at a questioning of that culture, in fact the comic nature of Abraham also hints at that questioning without being unfaithful to the tradition in which the story is set.

Sarah we are to understand recognises God, she is afraid when she hears the rebuke, but the rebuke is an underlining of the of the child's name – laughter. The plan is still progressing, for now.

Hymn

Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

As grace first taught my heart to fear
so grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and he will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures;

and, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace.

JOHN NEWTON (1725-1807) altd.*

Reading

Genesis 20:1-18

Thoughts

One of our favourite television programmes was Hustle, a group of talented con men in the tradition of Robin Hood, who make a living by conning the ethically challenged super rich out of their money.

It is hard not to see Abraham in this light, and indeed I once heard Janet Tollington, much loved teacher of Old Testament at Westminster College, suggest such a thing. Until I was studying this passage, I had not fully understood the reference but it this is the second time we read of Abraham pulling the sister trick and profiting from it. Abimelech must wonder if this has happened in other towns where Abraham has visited, especially when he hears Abraham's defence, and so might we.

In Egypt, Abraham defended himself because of Sarah's beauty, many years have now passed and although Sarah will still be beautiful she is also old, at least ninety, so Abraham has another excuse, he saw that the people did not fear God! However, he also reveals something quite extraordinary by modern standards, Sarah is in fact his half-sister, something the narrator chose not to reveal when giving us the ancestry of Abraham and Sarah. In biblical times there are instances recorded of other such marriages but if we are to believe Abraham about this fact we must also take seriously the other facts in his defence – his anger at God for taking him away from his family, and his inheritance and, more importantly, that he has been playing this trick time and time again. Where does that leave Sarah?

Abimelech thinks he knows and in his settlement includes a special payment to exonerate Sarah from the whole messy business, the payment of course is made to Abraham as women were not permitted to receive such payments, but it is made to show he believes Abraham but also believes that Sarah has suffered much abuse at the hands of her 'brother'.

The positioning of this story is strange. At this point both Abraham and Sarah know that Sarah is to have Abraham's child, as promised by God. Unless Abraham doubts either his own ability to father that child, or God's ability to fulfil the promise why would he use Sarah in this way now, why risk the whole promise of God? It could be that he was financially desperate, it could be that it had become so much of a habit that he simply didn't think, or it could be that it was nothing to do with Abraham. Abimelech's words and actions place Sarah centre stage, although she is seemingly once again a pawn in the narrator's hands. Could it be that the exoneration is important in the story line, in a similar way the virginity of Mary? I do not know but it does make me wonder.

As we have been seeing, the essence of this story has echoes around the world today, females, sometimes barely old enough to be women, find themselves invisible, silent pawns in a world still dominated by men in too many places. Cultures still allow terrible things to happen and the way of Jesus challenges this just as the prophets challenged rituals of their time. There is no place in God's creation for abuse of any kind. The Kingdom of God is about love. The Jesus way is about the fullness of our humanity and stories like this highlight the areas we need to work on before every human can truly explore the fullness of their humanity. There are plenty of agencies who seek to help women, and challenge these practices, we need to help them through prayer, through proclamation and through our generosity and love for one another.

Prayers of concern and commitment

Loving God, as we worship you apart, we are held together in the oneness of your being. We are part of your creation and within you we are one with all that is, and one with all who are. When others hurt our hearts are sad and when others rejoice our hearts are glad. Within life's rich tapestry there are so many feelings, so many experiences, so many emotions woven together by the spirit, into a fabric of love.

As we worship you this morning, we bring our prayers of concern, prayers for a world held together in your love but experiencing fear and frustration, hurt and pain. As we wrestle with the effects of Covid 19, we pray for those who are fighting the disease, patients and those caring for them, we pray for those recovering whose lives may never be the same, and we pray for those who have lost a loved one and whose lives will never be the same; may they know your love and feel your presence in their lives holding them and comforting them, giving them hope. We give thanks for the scientists who are seeking a solution that will allow us to live with this virus, and we give thanks for all those

who have worked, often at risk, to maintain the structures that enable our communities: may they know your love and feel your presence in their lives holding them and encouraging them, giving them hope.

We pray for the people in countries where there is insufficient healthcare, insufficient food, and less infrastructure to support life; people in countries where war rages alongside the virus and injustice feeds acts of terrorism; may they know your love and feel your presence in their lives holding them and comforting them, giving them hope.

We pray for the people who fear for the future, people who have lost their jobs, who have lost their businesses, whose homes are threatened and those who have become homeless; people who are facing a diagnosis that will change their lives, of caring for a loved one with a terminal illness and feel overwhelmed and lost; may they know your love and feel your presence in their lives holding them and comforting them, giving them hope.

We pray for women and girls for whom the fullness of their humanity is diminished by the actions of others, who are terrorised by ritual and abused in ways we dare not imagine for it hurts too much. In our oneness with such hurting may we support and encourage agencies who seek to help women and girls, who seek give them the freedom and opportunity to explore the fullness of their humanity, and show them a love which can overcome their fear. May these women and girls, and the workers who support them know your love and feel your presence in their lives holding them and comforting them, giving them hope.

Loving God, our prayers are less without our commitment to make a difference, and so we pray for the courage to love generously, to speak out against injustice and by our actions and words to bring your kingdom of love closer every day. We can feel overwhelmed, thinking our actions make little difference, but in your Spirit we know each moment has the potential to make a difference, each word spoken, each gesture made when filled with love helps overcome fear. May we encourage one another and reach out to friends and strangers, sowing seeds of love to grow flowers of hope. These prayers we offer in oneness with Jesus who is our guide on the way. 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

Communion *Please have a piece of bread and a small glass of wine, cordial, or water.*

When Jesus was on earth, he often enjoyed meals with his friends.

On the night before he died, when darkness was beginning to fall, he sat at table with the disciples in an upper room in Jerusalem.

At this Last Supper, he broke bread and took wine, and told his disciples to remember him by following his example and sharing his message by their words and actions.

Today, we are his followers, and we accept his challenge.

Though we are apart we are one in God, and the bread and wine we share are part of creation, as we are, and in sharing them we are sharing in the eternal oneness.

As the Jesus took bread and wine, we take this bread and wine, set apart for this holy use, in this moment.

Sing	Gathered together within God,	(Tune Old Hundreth)
	source of all life here and beyond;	
	here we will share in bread and wine,	
	gifts of great love for humankind.	

Jesus gave thanks, let us give our thanks and praise

Let us pray:

Loving God, you created this world in all its wonder for us to enjoy.

In Jesus, we have discovered a new way to be,

a new way to see the world, and a new way to understand you.

In you we are one with all creation. In you is all love.

For the gift of your love we thank you,

and join with those who have gone before in a hymn of praise:

Eternal God of power and might, all creation is full of your glory

Praise be to you.

Your blessing is on all who gather in your name

Praise be to you.

For your gracious kindness to all your people, we give you thanks.

We thank you for Jesus and his message of hope, life eternal in the Christ,

the one who was before, is now and forever will be.

We thank you that Jesus has revealed to us our oneness within you,

challenging our false understanding of separateness.

We thank you that we are free to gather together,

strengthened by your love and encouraging each other in your love.

Take these your gifts of bread and wine,

that in them, we may know your presence,

and in sharing them be filled with your love. Amen

Jesus took bread, and having given thanks, he broke it, and said,

'This is my body, which will be broken. Whenever you share together remember me.'

Loving God, we share the eternal oneness of this bread.

From seed to grain, from grain to flour, from flour to bread blessed by creativity. As we eat this

bread, we are blessed in its oneness with creation and our oneness with you and all people.

In the same way Jesus took a cup of wine saying, 'this wine is the new covenant, whenever you drink it remember me.'

This is the promise of eternal life in the oneness of God.

Loving God, in this cup we remember the promise of eternal life in your oneness. As we drink this

wine reveal in us your Spirit that we may journey in love, remembering that the light of Christ gives

new life to all and helps us see things afresh.

Having shared together we commit ourselves anew to the way of Jesus, the way of love. May our lives

be witness to oneness, and our words and actions be witness to your love, in Jesus name Amen.

Sing

Here having shared a holy feast,

(Old Hundreth)

given in love for all to eat,

now we will journey on in love,

one with each other and with God.

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.