

Sunday 4th October 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 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT4n1hGjDDg>

Prayer

Eternal God, all creation sings of your glory,

The earth proclaims your infinity in its silent wonder and visual magnificence.

The moon, stars and sun speak of the care of creation;

days and seasons witness to your creative energy that is the source of all being.

All this revives our souls and makes known the oneness of creation to all people.

In you e are called to acknowledge our oneness,

to rejoice in our place within creation,

to fill our hearts with your love,

and open our eyes to see you in all things.

Within you is all truth and love, justice and honour.

Such things are greater than passing treasures.

As we meet together, we embrace your presence and allow your love to overcome our fear.

When we meet together we join in creation's song of praise and lift our hearts to you.

May our lives speak of your love, and our oneness with each other;

May our actions and words always praise you and honour you

and embrace the others in the love we find in you.

As a fellowship following the way of Christ we praise you and offer you thanks, and together we say the prayer of Jesus:

The Lord's prayer

Readings

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Matthew 21:33-46

Story

One day a man travelling around the world stopped in the Australian outback. He was invited to stay on a cattle ranch and having enjoyed generous hospitality he was delighted when his host invited him to explore the land he farmed. There was a lot of land, and they travelled for hours and hours, the farmer showing his guest his well-cared for cattle, content grazing the lush landscape.

Eventually they stopped to share refreshment and the man, slightly puzzled, asked how the farmer fenced in the cattle.

The farmer chuckled and said there was absolutely no way he could fence his property, it was too vast. Still puzzled, the man asked how the farmer kept his cattle on his land. The answer was waterholes. The cattle stayed close to where they found water, as long as there was water there was no need for a fence. Cattle the farmer said were like people, fence them in and they will break out, offer them what they need, and they will draw closer.

Based on an Australian wisdom story.

Reflection

The Israelites had escaped Egypt, but they had been slaves for generations, and many had known no other life. As slaves they had not had much freedom, most of their moments were accounted for and they had few choices to make. Having escaped they were on their own and they did not know

what to do, they did not know how to make choices. They moaned a lot, particularly at Moses, but it was a product of their confusion. To help guide them they received what many call the Ten Commandments, rules for living together in community. Throughout the years these commandments have often been seen as prohibitions, fences perhaps, and the Pharisees and Scribes added to them once the people were settled and their religious system was in place. It was the powerful controlling the masses.

Our reading from Matthew highlights that this was still happening, and Jesus challenged then, suggesting they were misinterpreting the law and making it far too difficult for people to be the people of God. With so many rules it was not an attractive proposition and so they were teaching the people to fear God rather than love God.

Adrian Plass tells a wonderful story entitled 'The Well', in which a rich landowner builds a village and invites people to come and live in the village. At the centre of the village is a well, the only water supply, and the landowner knows it is important that people realise this is for everyone, without restriction. Having, he believes made this clear the landowner goes off on his travels. Everything goes well for a time but eventually the richer inhabitants begin to be disgruntled that they have to queue with the poorer people and being powerful they invent some rules. Water could only be drawn at specific times and in specific quantities and two forms had to be filled in for permission. This advantaged the rich and powerful, moreover they claimed these rules were based on a secret document left by the landowner. Many years later, a young man, arrived in the village, and upset by what he found, he challenged the rulers and said he too had a document from the landowner in which it was said that access to the well required people to learn a complicated series of dance moves. Each party asked to see the respective documents but neither party produced anything, and it was decided that either forms or dance would be permitted. One day the landowner returned and approaching the well was asked if he was a form filler or a dancer. Puzzled he asked what they meant and the guard explained about the landowner building the well and leaving instructions about access, he added that they hoped he would return one day and build a second well which would make things so much easier. The landowner wept.

We are a people of rules and yet there is one rule above all others – love your neighbour. The ten commandments can also be seen as rules for freedom, a guide to how to love one another. Rather than prohibitions they are markers of how far we have travelled in our journey of faith, our journey towards the fullness of our humanity.

God says,

You will recognise your progress towards me by these signs, these indications, these changes in YOU.

1. You will remember that you are free and why you are free.
2. You will stop trying to imagine me and instead just accept me. You will love me with everything you are and have. No longer will you worship success, money, power or symbols of these; you will have outgrown them.
3. You will not use my name when things go wrong nor will you call upon me for frivolous things; you will understand the power of words and thoughts and use them wisely.
4. You will remember to keep a day for me and you shall call it holy and eventually when you remember you will see every day as special and every moment as holy.
5. You will honour your parents, respect and love them, and you will honour all people.
6. You will know you have found me when you realise that you will not kill. You will not choose to end any life without the most sacred reason. Your new reverence for life will cause you to honour all life forms including plants, trees and animals.

7. You will not do anything to harm another's friendship or relationship. You will not be jealous of other's friendships.
8. You will not take a thing that is not your own, nor cheat, nor manipulate, nor harm, when you have found me.
9. You will not say anything that you do not believe to be true.
10. You will not envy or desire anything that others have.

You will know you have found the path to God when you see these signs in yourself (transformation). These are freedoms not restrictions, promises not commandments.

When we share our story, is it a story of love, a story of opportunity and possibility, or is it a story of rules? If all people see of our journey are the creeds and doctrines of the church then what might we expect their response to be? Following the way of Christ is a journey of discovery, an invitation to explore potential and the possible. It is different for everyone and our personal experiences and reflections what enable others to recognise their own call to the journey. Jesus knew this, and he knew that waterholes and not fences would attract more people. As we journey, there will be times of doubt and challenge but faith in God's love makes all the difference. I leave you with two lists, the first is a condensed version of the ten words for freedom, the guidelines for community and fellowship living that will help us to embrace our oneness. The second list is an extract from Dave Tomlinson's *The Bad Christian's Manifesto* in which having explored Christianity without creeds and doctrine he lists his aims and ambitions as a follower of the way of Jesus. Take time to explore both lists and check for waterholes and fences, then try and produce your own list to live by.

Ten words for freedom

Remember I gave you freedom.

I am beyond your imagination, so don't try.

Don't fall victim to other 'prisons' (obsessions) be faithful to me.

Take responsibility for your actions; don't blame me when things go wrong.

Live carefully and take care.

Love one another and care for one another.

Learn from one another.

Be faithful to each other

Be honest with each other.

I will give you all you need, don't take more.

The Bad Christian's Manifesto (©Dave Tomlinson)

- To follow the way of Jesus rather than rules and conventions.
- To doubt and question WITHOUT fear, and never be daunted by orthodoxies and authority figures.
- To make a priority of kindness and compassion and pursue justice for all people.
- To embrace messiness and imperfection while aspiring to be all that we can be.
- To live courageously, and resist being motivated by guilt or fear.
- To love the world and honour it as God's body.
- To have parties, laugh often, enjoy friends and welcome strangers.
- To resist passing judgement and befriend people in the margins.
- To look for God in every person and situation.

You might like to read the whole book, or the first book which explores *How to be a Bad Christian*, both are worth looking at for inspiration.

Song – Carrie Newcomer Three feet or so,

watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6dROanqO8j8&t=139s>

Prayers of concern and commitment

Eternal God, source of all being, as we worship you, we think of the world in which we live and share our concerns and our commitment to the way of Christ.

When governments and religions try to separate us with rules and conditions may we remember that your love embraces everyone, and your grace enfolds all mistakes. Rather than judging others may we reach out to those who are different and learn from them, exploring together possibilities and potential. Where our creeds and doctrine would push people away, may our story and experience invite people in.

Loving God, when we are tempted to build fences, inspire us to create waterholes.

In a world with too many dividing lines may we reflect your love through our words and actions and build bridges, sharing what we have generously. Where there is hunger let us share food, where there is thirst let us share water, where there is illness let us share care so that all may experience your love and know the wonder of belonging.

Loving God, when we are tempted to build fences, inspire us to create waterholes.

In a world where injustice and inequality feed the anger and hatred of war may we create wateringholes of equality and strive to fight injustice. As we learn more of you through our journey together may we reach out to those on different paths or no path and invite them to share with us their journey so that we can experience the oneness of your love in new ways.

Loving God, when we are tempted to build fences, inspire us to create waterholes.

Sometimes the task feels too big, the challenge too great, when we feel overwhelmed may we remember our oneness and draw on the strength of others so that doing what we can, we will make a difference, a yard at a time. In your love there need be no fear, and in your presence there is always hope, may our lives reflect that hope to those around us.

Loving God, when we are tempted to build fences, inspire us to create waterholes.

May we take time each day to identify the waterholes and cherish them, and recognise the fences and challenge them, encouraging one another to journey in love following the ten words of freedom Amen.

Our offering to God.

As we continue to worship apart but together, we pledge our commitment to sharing in the work of our church through our continued offering and by exploring new ways of living generously, and may we know your blessing on all we do. Amen

Suggested hymn Christ be our light

Watch at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GV3A6_eYXnc

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.