

Sunday 6th September 2020

Today's worship includes communion, you are invited to have a small piece of bread and a small glass of water, juice or wine to hand.

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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

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise.

CHARLES WESLEY (1707-88)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw5ZCZeS32M>

Prayer

Glory to God, glory to God in the highest.

Loving God you are all around, in the highest and lowest, if we only praise you in the highest, we fail to see the magnificence of your being. Eternal God, source of all being we find you in quietest, the smallest, the most insignificant of moments and in finding you, that moment becomes the loudest, greatest, and most significant of times. Your love changes the world and changes us; our moments become a cascade of wonder as we see you all around. Glory to God, glory in the highest.

Loving God, for your presence in our lives, we thank you. For surprises in unexpected moments, we thank you. For the joy of family and friends and new relationship, we thank you. For the care of strangers, we thank you. For our life together as your people we thank you. For the teaching and example of Jesus and the path it reveals, we thank you. For the whole of creation which sustains us,

we thank you. For the guidance of the Spirit bringing challenge and choice into every day, we thank you. For the strength to live in hope, we thank you.

The Lord's prayer

Readings Exodus 12:1-14
Matthew 18:15-20

Story

Once upon a time, in the land of sea and sun, there lived an old man. The man had lived a long and happy life on his island home, surrounded by family and friends who had worked together and laughed together. The old man was wise and knew his God; one day he recognised that his days on the island were coming to an end and he asked his sons to help him outside one last time. He stood and quietly took in the view, breathing deeply, and then he bent and gathered a handful of soil which he held tightly in his fingers. Then he went back inside.

Not long afterwards the man died, and his soul approached what he imagined were the gates of heaven. Angels stood there and on seeing him approach they welcomed him and invited him through the gates. However, as the man attempted to cross the threshold the angels stopped him and said gently, 'you must first let go of what is in your hand'. The old man stared at the angel and then at his hand, in which he still held the soil. Sadly, he shook his head saying that he could not let go of the soil, it was the soil of his home.

The angel replied, sadly, that if that were the case the man could not enter. For a long time, the man remained outside the gates, sad and lonely. The angels often came to the gates and looked at the man, but he sadly shook his head and held tight to his soil. One day there was a special banquet inside the gates and the angels brought the man a sample of the heavenly food and again they asked him to join them inside the gates but still the man could not let go of the soil.

More years passed and then the angels came with the man's granddaughter who had now died. Seeing her grandfather, she exclaimed with joy, and the old man ran towards her and as he did so he opened his arms and the soil fell from his hand.

Now, he could enter, and found to his amazement all he had missed for so many years.

Based on a traditional Mediterranean story.

Suggested hymn One more step along the world I go
See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhtSwx7cpTY>

Reflection

Our reading from Exodus reminds us of the very beginning of the Passover celebrations on which our own communion services are based. In this reading we can see how some of the rituals we find in other denominations have come about and we are reminded that things evolve. The people of Israel were in Egypt, and their journey through the wilderness was yet to happen but in this passage we get a hint that things might be about to change. They were to eat in their clothes, perhaps ready to run, and they were to eat hurriedly in case the time to run was suddenly upon them.

The people of Israel had many new beginnings and every time I am sure they settled into life and a new normal was experienced. If we look back, we recognise how much has changed in our lives, the things we 'took' as normal had not always been the way. Israel experienced slavery in Egypt, they became a travelling people in the wilderness, they became a settled people in Canaan and then an exiled people in Babylon. When eventually they were able to return to Judah, it was not to the place they had left but to a whole new experience of that place, a new normal.

How do we know the way forward and how do we let go? That is the question we are facing today as we contemplate life together in a socially distancing world. We might long to return to the way it

was before, but history shows us that it is rarely possible. When we are separated what we knew changes as we journey in a different direction and, coming back, we often find the places we knew so well very changed. We only have to visit somewhere we once lived to experience this.

We have a set of guidelines for living together, and travelling together, some call them the Ten Commandments, others the ten words of freedom. They are not so much a list of prohibitions as a checklist of our progress in living together as one. Paul, in Romans 13, says they are summed up in one rule – love your neighbour as yourself. The question we need to ask ourselves as we reflect on our journey is how well are we fulfilling our call to be loving?

In Matthew 18 we find another guideline for life together, agreement. Agreeing, it has been discovered, is one of the foundational principles of our humanity, along with belonging, giving and taking turns. However, in life we are often faced with a different point of view, a different course of action. This does make for interesting times when we are trying to discern the way forward together! Our passage today follows on from Matthews version of the Lost Sheep which in turn was Jesus' way of answering the question 'who is the greatest'. In our strange reality of separateness, we often find ourselves comparing our situation with another's situation and we are nearly always tempted to make a judgement decision. There are still many different opinions on the role of Jesus but the writer of John's Gospel is clear about one thing, Jesus did not come to judge the world, he came to serve. It is a reminder of our true reality which is oneness. God's love encompasses all people and is fortunately not dependent on getting it right all the time. There will be times when we encounter difference, it is our response to it to that is important.

The other week I was watching Gardner's World when a film was introduced featuring someone who 'was born with an upper limb difference', and it struck me that this was a much better way of introducing someone than saying they had a disability. We are all different, and inevitably we come at things from a different point of view. The United Reformed Church took the decision some years ago to introduce consensus decision making at meetings of Assembly, Mission Council and Synods. It is a good principle, designed to allow generous exploration of different points of view and to demonstrate a seeking of the Spirit's guidance as we meet together. Generally, it works, however there have been frustrations when the essence of the process has perhaps not been fully understood. What do you do when, in a room of two hundred and fifty people five people refuse to agree with the principle others see as the way forward? What is the loving action in that situation? It is the nature of our humanity that we may all have a different opinion of the answer.

As I pondered this passage from Matthew I wondered if we all agree when we gather for worship, what does it mean to walk the way together, and also, why did Matthew include this bit? I suspect the answer to the last point lies in the reality that within the early church there were many different viewpoints, and perhaps that is why we have four different gospels. They each give a slightly different perspective, yet together they allow us to make an informed choice which we pray will have love at its heart.

We will find the way forward together. Listening to one another and praying, giving ourselves time to reflect on what we have heard and to sense God's voice speaking to us in the stillness. Our instant reaction may be quite different from our prayerful reaction. We may not always agree and that is when letting go comes into the process. It is not only about letting go of the past, it is about letting go of our preconceived ideas of the future. We need to allow ourselves to change our minds without feeling we have given in. If the process works, we are listening and responding, and letting go is an act of love, a gift to the future path of our journeying together. It is an important gift that could change someone's life and creation itself.

Ancient wisdom suggests that people are not lovable until they are loved. In other words, it is as we receive the gifts of grace, mercy and love that we become people who can exhibit grace, mercy and love. If two people make different life choices do we give in to the temptation of judgment or do we offer the unconditional love of God. The generosity of God's love is beyond the petty mindedness of

seeing difference as negative and encompasses the revelation of difference. We grow when we listen and learn, and we can learn from difference.

There is an Iona Community meditation that expresses this wonderfully, called 'The Teachers'. A person is taken into a room where there are pairs of people, each with a difference and the question is posed who is learning from whom? Is the man who is blind being read to by the girl or is he teaching her to see more clearly? Is the woman in the bed, having her sores dressed, being nursed by her carer or is she teaching the girl how to care? The reflection comes in our response to seeing difference, do we thank God that we are 'whole' or do we thank God for the opportunity to explore our need?

We can grow from recognising what we should no longer do as church and let go so that we can enter a new period in our church lives. We can bemoan what we cannot do or celebrate new opportunities. We can learn from our enforced experiences and model that learning into a more loving expression of being church together. We do have a choice. How we use the choice will shape our response to the future and our speed of journeying to the kingdom.

Hymn

Wake up, wake up, for God is all around us,
light of the world and comfort for the soul;
guiding and leading, loving without question,
God of our lives you are our journey's goal.

Have faith, have faith when in your life you question,
and worry that your choices have been poor.
God's love is open, holding every human,
merciful love that opens every door.

Take heart, take heart, be open in your journey,
learning from others met along the way.
Through conversations, in the act of sharing
we become one and choose the loving way.

Be one, be one, forever in creation,
Love bound, united, living fearlessly;
worried no more, we join in glad thanksgiving
praising our God who is eternity.

Wake up, wake up our God is all around us,
living in love we walk the way of Christ.
We are God's people, we are building kingdom;
justice and freedom, in the name of Christ.

Heather Whyte August 2020

tune Lord of the years <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MFYsyUvMjeM>

Prayers of concern and commitment

Loving God, there are times when our world seems filled with darkness and we struggle to see the way forward, yet in that darkness is the glimmer of a flame, the candle of love and our light in the darkness. **Our path is the way of Jesus, the way of love, may we seek the way of love as we walk in the world.**

We long for peace and yet our papers are filled with violence and destruction. Injustice fuels unloving actions, we cry with those who suffer injustice, but we also cry out against the violence. Loving God may we be the voice that promotes difference as a positive learning experience, accepting each other as uniquely different and celebrating the diversity of your creation. May we show a way of living in the difference whilst enabling equal opportunity for all you people. May we

