

Sunday 28th February 2021

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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 Lord of creation, to you be all praise

Listen [here](#).

Prayer

Eternal God of creation as we gather in your presence we bring our praise and thanksgiving. Surrounded by the beauty of creation in all its diversity and wonder we are constantly reminded of your goodness. As we pray, we give thanks for the world in which we live, for the colours of the land, the flowers and the trees, the green of the grass and the blue of the sky, the yellow of daffodils slowly blossoming like miniature suns amongst the grey of winter and the rainbows lighting the sky after rain. There are so many signs of your love, it sometimes blows our minds.

As we rejoice in seeing one another we give thanks for family and friends, companions on our journey through life, people to care and people who help, people with whom to laugh and people with whom to cry. In all the ups and downs you are with is us in the love of friends and family, and in the still of the night.

As we gather to worship, we remember the life and ministry of Jesus and all that he has brought to our journey, the challenges and the promises, the knowledge of your love for all your people, and his example of service and patience. For all of this we give you thanks and together say the words Jesus taught his disciples,

Our father

Introduction

As I explored this week's readings I was faced with questions, they seemed disparate readings and the questions that arose became the connection. A theme emerged not from the readings themselves but from the questions that surrounded them – the Bible in context. To answer some of the questions that emerge from reading the bible we need to understand the context. So, this week we are going to explore context.

Readings

Exodus 17:1-7, 15 & 16

Mark 8:31-38

Exploration

The book of Exodus tells the story of the journey of the people of Israel, from the beginning through slavery and into the promised land. It has twists and turns, and it paints a picture of the people's faith journey and the concept of trusting God. It was written long after the events it describes, during the time when Israel was in exile in Babylon, and it is not hard to see why it was written, it was to remind them of God's faithfulness and God's promise to them.

Think of an important event in your family history, how did it come about, what led to it happening, where did it happen and why there, who was involved and when did the process of the event begin? My graduation from Cambridge could never have been foreseen and the process of that graduation began long before the event. Since leaving Scotland I had been in a wilderness period in relation to church and then because of Norman's work we moved to Wickford in Essex and we became involved with Scouting again, there were two Scout Groups in Wickford and I became a Cub Scout Leader in the second Group and then left when I discovered I was pregnant. Norman then decided to get involved but he did not drive and so joined the other Scout Group which met nearer to where we lived. It met in a church, a URC/Methodist church and the Scouts went on parade to church. I went along to the service and discovered a new spiritual home. I joined the URC and became an Elder and then Church Secretary and then we moved to Yardley Hastings where I worked at the URC National Youth Resource Centre and my spiritual journey took a turn as I explored a call to ministry. I spent four years commuting weekly to Cambridge and studied through Lucy Cavendish college for a BTH degree and then I graduated. If we had not moved to Wickford, and Norman had not become a Scout Leader I

might not have discovered the URC. If I had not moved to Yardley Hastings, I may never have acknowledged a call to ministry and I would never have studied at Cambridge. All those separate events were a part of the story of my graduation.

That is what Exodus is about, looking back and piecing together the events and decisions that led to the understanding of God and self which the Israelites needed to remember when they were exiled in Babylon. The question that arose for me was a simple one, why did Abram's name change, and the answer is in the meaning of names. Abram means exalted father, but Abraham means father of a multitude, of course the father of Israel had to be called Abraham.

The questions that arose from the reading in Mark were far from simple, why did Jesus ask that first question of the disciples, why did he tell the disciples not to share their thoughts with others, why did he call Peter Satan, and what do verses 34-38 really mean?

Mark's gospel is understood to have been the first of the gospels to be written but widely accepted to have been written after 70CE at a time when the early church was suffering persecution. It has been accepted as biography in genre but not in the same way as a modern biography, and it lacks many of the aspects we expect of a biography. We are not sure exactly which community Mark was writing for but we believe he himself does not have a Judaic background, and so it is probably written to engage with gentile Christians who were probably less accepted at the time. The questions to the disciples about the identity of Jesus are likely scene setting, expressing the widely differing views of the identity of Jesus at the time, and to some extent still in the time of Mark's writing. They are a forerunner to Jesus talking about what is likely to happen. He was aware that his actions were not popular amongst the Jewish leaders and the unrest around him was raising awareness amongst the Roman leadership, the civil authorities. He may have speculated that this would lead to his death, however the precise details of that death have probably been inserted by Mark rather than being described by Jesus and the specific details of the passion are almost definitely written with hindsight. When Peter would stop Jesus from explaining his fears, Jesus turns on him and calls him Satan. Jesus was talking about suffering, he appears to understand that suffering is a part of his calling, and his calling is from God. Perhaps he feels that in challenging the mention of suffering Peter is denying God's role in the call of Jesus and anything that opposes God was at the time referred to as satanic, not in the sense of the devil but in the Old Testament understanding of the Satan or the Accuser, the challenger of God.

Verses 34 – 38 have long been quoted by church, there have been choruses and songs written from this text. However, the specific language of these verses is probably borrowed from other sources and assembled by Mark. The inclusion of the crowd may be a way of opening up the acceptance of 'suffering' beyond the 'twelve' and to all who follow the Jesus way, this would make sense given the time that Mark is writing. He is exploring suffering in the context of his readers, the early church. The reference to cross-bearing is again probably hindsight, Jesus may have foreseen death, but crucifixion was a Roman punishment for political rebels and at this stage in his journey Jesus would be unlikely to have foreseen crucifixion and he would be unlikely to have foreseen his followers being crucified. If every follower were killed the movement would not have survived. Suffering was happening, and still happens in many parts of the world for those who express a belief in Jesus, but it is the suffering of intolerance, of injustice rather than as political rebels.

When we understand the context of the writing it answers some questions but nearly always raises more, especially, where do we see these things happening in the world around us and what should we be doing to change those things, as followers of the way of Jesus and understanding ourselves as participators in creation?

Suggested Hymn Tune Regent's Square Listen [here](#)

We are pilgrims on a journey,
following the path Christ shows;
one with God and with all people,
changing as the Spirit blows.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

When we gather here to worship,
voices praising, hearts made whole,
we encounter fresh ideas,
new expressions light our soul.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Life is like a mighty puzzle,
piece by piece God is revealed;
when we share our story gently
other people can be healed.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

We are witness to God's wonder,
seeing daily love divine,
living, loving, being Jesus
building kingdom as a sign.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

Held in love and bathed in mercy,
God within us we are one;
ever open to the Spirit,
as we grow and journey on.
We are called to share our story,
Sowing seeds of love in lives.

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Reading

Psalm 22 (NRSV)

Exploration

Psalm 22 is a lament, and I am sure many might identify with the sentiments at this time. The questions that arise for me concern the language used and the understanding of God this implies, and where that sits with our 21st century understanding of God. Most of you will be aware of my interest in quantum theology which takes new understandings and seeks to express our understanding of God in an appropriate manner. The progress of the people of Israel's understanding of God is charted through various books of the bible and moves from many gods to one God, and from a God of wrath to a God of love. This latter is why we often struggle with some of the language and expressions of the Old Testament picture of God. Jesus opened up a new way of understanding and relating to God, the fullness of which we have yet to absorb. As humanity has explored creation from the depths to outer space, we have been forced to develop different understandings, Heaven as being above the earth is just one such concept. For me, God, or the source of all being, is everywhere and in everything, including me, I am a part of God for God is everything. This then asks the question what do we mean when we ask God to come, to be near us; are we contradicting that understanding of God as everywhere? How can we be separate from God?

The first part of Psalm 22 is written from a place of despair, expressing abandonment and prayers receiving no answer. This is real for the writer, and for many today, however, when we understand ourselves as one with all creation, we see this as an expression not of abandonment but of imagining ourselves as separate, a state we have been brought up to believe is reality and yet we are beginning to understand a different reality.

In the Psalm the despair gives way to a new understanding, a sense that God has rescued the writer and the response is gratitude, awe and praise, and a promise to tell future generations about God's mercy. In some ways, this Psalm charts our journey and we also find ourselves responding to God's grace with gratitude, awe and praise. When I looked at this Psalm through the lens of quantum theology my challenge was to include the lament, a very real state at many times in life, but to try and understand the reasons for lament as a shutting ourselves off from God rather than being abandoned.

One of the reasons why I have taken on the challenge of rephrasing the Psalms is because the language within them often prevents us from appreciating the context, prevents us from identifying with the feelings expressed, the question arising being how this can have any relevance for me, and yet the Psalms are about life and about our journey. So, expressing them through quantum theology I hope will make them more accessible to a new audience and become a resource for 21st Century pilgrimage. When we look at the Bible in context, we can better apply the learning of the past to our challenges today.

Psalm 22 (Psalms for a quantum world)

I feel alone,
no one can help,
no one hears.

I feel abandoned,
separate in time and space
and yet I know you are all around.
You are always there for humanity,
listening, speaking,
giving knowledge and wisdom;
but I am cut off,
feel less than human,
separate from all that is.
I feel mocked by the beauty of the world
and misunderstood by those who think life easy.
You know me better than I know myself,
I am part of creation, part of you
and yet you seem distant, unreachable.
My enemies are all around,
prowling like predators
and I am falling apart.
Death seems near.

Then from within my despair
I recognise my need;
from giving voice to my separation
I sense my oneness.
From understanding comes restoration,
I feel my soul once more in your presence,
and I will proclaim your praise to all people.

Let all humanity hear and respond,
the eternal source of all being is with us always,
we are one,
and in oneness is justice,
in oneness is love for all
and no one has need.

Praise God, source of all being,
our partner in creation
and in whom we have our life.
Let us tell of this knowledge
and share this understanding
with all who follow.
In the eternal source is all meaning and life.

Suggested song **Pretty Amazing Grace by Neil Diamond**

[Watch here](#)

Prayers

Loving God we bring to you our prayers of concern, and our commitment to a learning and loving that will change the world. In these times of pandemic and isolation we recognise the Psalmist's lament and bring to you our concerns for all who are struggling with loss and despair; those whose mental health has been affected by separation, isolation and enforced inactivity; those who have lost loved ones or been frustrated by separation from loved ones. We recognise how this is affecting our own lives and our journey together as your people and pray for the scientists and decision makers who are charting our course to a new normal. May we know your presence with us, may we learn patience and tolerance as we wait for change, and may we encourage one another in love.

May new understandings bring insight and direction for our journey together to the kingdom.

In our knowledge of your presence with us we lift to you those who have no sense of your presence, recognising our oneness, we pray that we may reach out with new understanding and new words to

inspire others to begin a journey of faith. In you is all meaning and all life, and when we fail to recognise this our lives are less, and we can find ourselves lost. Your love is for everyone and everything and when we understand this, we can embrace the oneness that will bring justice to the world. As we journey together may we share our questions and seek to help each other find answers.
May new understandings bring insight and direction for our journey together to the kingdom.

Loving God we sense your lament over our failure to share the goodness of your creation. When people are hungry, have no clean water, no access to medicines and must watch their children die we sense your heartbreak and feel your call to action. When children become orphans and live on the streets we sense your heartbreak and feel your call to action. Sometimes, we feel overwhelmed, but you call us to a life together and together we can do amazing things. May we seek new ways to help others, sharing generously and loving graciously, never judging but accepting that circumstances and not decisions often chart our lives.

May new understandings bring insight and direction for our journey together to the kingdom.

As we learn to live together may we work to preserve life on earth through our care for creation. As science discovers the depths of the challenge may our hope lift us to new heights of awareness and new commitment to living sustainably. May we listen and act to change our destruction to creation, our polluting to preserving, and our consumerism to sharing.

May new understandings bring insight and direction for our journey together to the kingdom.

Loving God as we follow the way of Jesus may we be open to new ideas, accepting of others, and creative in our living that the future of life may be the reality of the kingdom. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

Offertory

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

Gathered here to hear the stories
told by people long ago.
Stories of their lives and witness
to the God who helped them grow.
As we listen to their stories
we reflect on what we hear,
seeing God within our story,
sensing God is always near.

Gathered here we share our stories,
seeing God on every page.
Stories told of love and laughter,
sometimes joy and sometimes rage.
In their telling is revealed
all our human wants and woes,
but we also learn to treasure
how God's love throughout them flows.

Gathered here to share our witness
So, we pray for open hearts.
May our stories, joined together
help us cherish what they chart;
you are one with all your people,
we have never been alone.
May our lives reflect the story
through which all your love is shown.

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Tune Hyfrydol Listen [here](#)

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.