

Sunday 7th February 2021

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.

Suggested Hymn Lord of creation, to you be all praise
Listen [here](#).

Prayer

Eternal God present in every atom of the universe, the warp and weft of all creation, we gather in your presence to bring you praise. The ground of all being, you are within us and around us and support us through the wonders of your creation. We lift our hearts to you, listening for your word and resting in your eternal love. Opening our minds, we reflect on all we have received and offer our grateful thanks. Every day we face challenges and make decisions and every day we are surprised by your grace and your guiding Spirit which leads us towards the fulness of our humanity. Every day we try to follow the way of Jesus and most days we find ourselves diverted off the path, but your love draws us close again and in your love we begin again, recognising our mistakes and committing to learn from them. In love we offer thanks for the opportunity to begin again, and the opportunities to share your love with family, friends, strangers, and enemies, making a difference in the world through the power of connection and the offering of grace. In this power we meet together to listen, to learn and to pray and we offer you now the words of Jesus, as we say,
Our father

Reading Isaiah 40:21-31
Mark 1: 29-39

Story

There was once a young girl who was brave and fearless, she climbed trees faster than the boys, she explored creation with an enthusiasm that made her mum squirm when she found bugs and beasties in her pockets at night, she was always ready for the next adventure until it came to bedtime.

Then, she became a girl of habit using every technique to delay the moment the light went off. First it was a story, then she remembered she had not cleaned her teeth, then she had to say her prayers after which she needed the toilet, then she needed a drink, anything to delay that moment when the light went off because fearless by day, she was afraid of the dark.

Her mum would sit patiently, telling her she was not alone, explaining that God was always with her, but it rarely made any difference. Then one night the girl said she wanted a God with a face. Her mum asked her what she meant, and the girl replied that she needed to be able to imagine God and she couldn't because he did not have a face, she had never seen God so how could she imagine him?

Her mum held her close and shared how she saw God in the kindness and love around her and in the beauty of creation. She told her daughter that God was in everything she explored during the day and God was around her in the wind that rustled in the trees in the night, the rain that pattered on the windows at night, if she listened, she would hear God and she could remember what those sounds looked like in the day and know God in her heart.

The girl snuggled down and closed her eyes, listening with a smile on her face as the lullaby of creation rocked her sleep.

Suggested hymn Make me a channel of your peace
Listen [here](#)

Reflection

During my training we had the opportunity to visit Bromley-by-Bow URC. It was a sprawling building sat amidst tower blocks and streets of desolation. The church was small, eight to ten members, but

through the inspiration of a minister they had created a place of beauty and creativity for the whole community. The sanctuary had been converted into a space for a playgroup with storage all around the sides but in the centre was a worship hub with five pews forming a pentagon and above was suspended a tented ceiling. It was a tangible reminder of the presence of God in the day to day life of building, and on Sundays the pews were moved back to form the worship space. Just a taste of the creativity that is Bromley-by-Bow URC, there is a community café, a medical centre, a garden centre, as well as community workshops all of which speak of God' love.

Sometimes we, like the little girl in the story need a tangible reminder that God is with us and although God is not 'a person with a face' we can see God in the face of a friend or in the beauty around us. at the time of our reading from Isaiah, the Israelites were in exile in Babylon and they had been there some time. They were surrounded by Gods and there were graven images of these Gods but they were awakening to the very real presence of their God with them even though they did not have an image to worship. The exile is almost over, and they are facing a long journey back 'home', some 700 miles to be walked. Many today feel that the church is in exile and we face a long walk back home, but as the Israelites discovered on their return to Jerusalem things change and you can never go back to what was. This passage from Isaiah was about inspiring the Israelites to leave exile, to move on to the next stage in their journey with God and we need that inspiration as church and as individual. We long to leave the exile of Covid but we must recognise that it will not be the same, we have travelled in a different way and seen and experienced a different world we take that with us when we move into the new normal, the new way of being church.

Our inspiration is the Jesus way, and we glimpse this through the pages of the New Testament, through the gospels and letters that show how early Christians were inspired by the ministry of Jesus. The passage from Mark's gospel is intriguing not least because it tells us that Simon Peter was married, he had a mother-in-law. I wonder what his family thought when Simon abandoned them to follow Jesus, after all he had been a fisherman bringing in wages and suddenly there were no wages and no Simon. What did Simon think when he realised Jesus meant to travel widely? It is a reminder that the way of Jesus can mean hardship for us and for those we love, it is not a journey to take lightly. Back to Mark 1 and there are six points worth noting:

- Jesus power came from God.
- Jesus took time to be with God, to commune.
- when people were 'healed' by Jesus, they began to serve Jesus.
- the disciples would have been happy for Jesus to stay and heal others, there were plenty of people needing healed, but Jesus moves on, always looking for fresh opportunities.
- Jesus points to wholeness – words and actions, body and soul were to be healed, we too must minister to spiritual as well as bodily needs.
- the majority of people who flocked to Jesus gathered because they had heard what he had done and they wanted him to do the same for them – they did not come because they loved him, or because they had caught sight of some great vision, they came because they had a need. It is not that people don't believe in God they have simply not discovered their relationship with God, that is what we have to help them with.

To discover how we do this we need to tease a little more from these points.

Jesus was aware of his connection to God in creation, and that awareness brought a power and authority to his words and actions. We are also connected to God, but we do not yet have the same awareness of the connection and have yet to discover the power of that connection, but we can, and I hope we will. It will change the world and the path to the discovery is the way of Jesus.

Just as Jesus took time out to rest in God's presence, we also need to make time to sit and be, allowing ourselves the space to listen to God and be refreshed and inspired. If we are always busy, always doing, we struggle to discover ourselves and our own personal relationship with God and that means we have less to offer others as we reach out to them.

We might also miss our own 'healing' and so our response is not what it might be. The motto of the Salvation Army is 'Saved to serve', and later in Mark we read that Jesus came 'not to be served but to

serve'. It is a reminder that our response to recognising God in our lives is to share God's love through 'serving' others, putting the needs of others before our own needs, and this is what we see Simon doing early in his call when he leaves his family to follow Jesus.

Following Jesus involved travel, we are to go out. Jesus could have stayed in Capernaum and built a reputation as a healer, but he did not. He knew healing was only one way of showing God's love and his call was to awaken people to a new way of understanding God. The way of Jesus is to reach out, to travel and find people to talk to, and share with the message of God's eternal love. One to one conversations make us think as we try to explain our understanding of God, just as the mum in the story had to find a way to explain God's presence to her daughter. We have to draw on our experiences and put them into words, paint a picture of God for others to see.

The mission of the church involves body and mind, we are often very good at serving the bodily needs of others, but do we see spiritual needs within the mission of the church? Wholeness, the fullness of our humanity, is a whole life experience. The way we do worship has become a barrier to many who are searching for meaning, they need a place to sit and talk, to listen to how others equate experience to God's presence, to find inspiration through the interpretation of scripture relevant to today's understanding of the world. We have placed a dividing line, a separation, between worship and mission which is not evident in the early church and which is at odds with the wholeness of body and mind.

Our introduction to many is in offering hospitality, providing for physical need, and that is really important. However, it is only the introduction and we also need to offer hope in the form of knowing God and recognising the interconnection of the whole of life with the whole of creation. It is this which will ultimately build the kingdom. How can we do this?

Paul gives us a clue in his letter to the Corinthians when he talks of becoming a Jew to serve the Jews, becoming like someone outside the law to serve those outside the law. We are called to experience life in all its hues and colours, to step outside our comfort zones and become the other, even if only for a short time. We cannot help people if we do not walk in their shoes. We often say we are hungry, but we know there is food around the corner. Some fast for a day but know that the end is insight. What does it feel like to be hungry with no promise of food or to be forced to fast because there is no food? That is just one example, there is a fine line between empathy and sympathy and mission begins with empathy and empathy begins with listening.

We are called to conversations. Some of the most memorable conversations I have had have been with people who needed to defend their lack of faith, and often what was revealed was a misunderstanding of God, or of the church. I would listen and ask questions and then I would share my experience, my understanding, being careful to say that this was simply my understanding and there were other ideas and other understandings. In this way I have sown the seed of God's love. I thoroughly enjoyed going into primary schools to do assemblies, but the challenge of doing secondary school assemblies raised the bar and yet brought so many rewards. I would reach out, talking about a song or a film that was popular and sharing the questions it raised for me and how I began to try and place those questions into the perspective of my understanding of God. I believe they appreciated the honesty, and the vulnerability and they responded by welcoming me and rewarding me with spontaneous applause, and I hope they took the questions away to ponder for themselves.

I answered a call to share my understandings, to open doors in people's experience through which they might glimpse God and find a little bit of themselves, a call to invite people to experience God rather than reject God because the church has wrapped God up in 'humbug'. I am called to share the message not the doctrine and to use my own experience, my discovered understanding, and normal words to do it. It is the call we all feel when we choose to walk the way of Jesus, a call to reach out and make connections, connections that build the understanding we are called to share, connections that build relationships. It is a call to serve and the good news is that we can answer that call in so many different ways and conversations can still happen while we are separate.

Suggested hymn

Brother sister, let me serve you

Listen [here](#)

Prayers

We begin our prayer time with a new song from the Iona Community – we will meet when the danger is over. Watch [here](#)

Eternal God, this time of separation is lasting longer than any of us imagined and we are tired and frustrated, but it is a mere moment in creation, and we can still learn from this experience. As we long for the time when the danger is passed, and we can meet may we not waste the opportunity this experience brings for sitting in the calm of your presence and learning. May we recognise your call to reach out through letters and phone calls, sharing our experience and helping others to understand their own experience in relationship with you.

Loving God, you call to us in the midst of life, in the midst of creation, and we listen, and we answer.

Through your call to serve may we bring your love into the lives of everyone we meet.

As we listen to the news and hear of a world in need of love may we feel the call to serve others and respond in creative ways to bring hope into the lives of those who despair. Through generous support of those who can provide for needs, through letters and signing petitions, through sharing what we have with food banks may our call to serve be realised in the midst of separation.

Loving God, you call to us in the midst of life, in the midst of creation, and we listen and we answer.

Through your call to serve may we bring your love into the lives of everyone we meet.

We pray for leaders and decision makers in the world and in our communities; may their actions and words build community through justice and equal opportunity. May their actions and words encourage tolerance and understanding between people and build bridges not walls. We pray for wisdom in our decision making, may our words and actions make a difference to our brothers and sisters in love and build relationships within our community enabling new understanding between all people.

Loving God, you call to us in the midst of life, in the midst of creation and we listen and we answer.

Through your call to serve may we bring your love into the lives of everyone we meet.

We pray for all key workers, the people who serve others through their work within the community, doctors and nurses, carers and shop workers, deliverers and collectors, who maintain the infrastructure of our lives. May we recognise their service and offer them support and encouragement through a smile and appreciative words of thanks.

Loving God, you call to us in the midst of life, in the midst of creation and we listen and we answer.

Through your call to serve may we bring your love into the lives of everyone we meet.

We pray for the people of the world. We think of the places in the world where circumstances create hunger and homelessness, where disease can spread quickly and there is little infrastructure to help. May we find ways of serving our brothers and sisters in faraway places. We think of people fleeing violence and abuse, fleeing hunger and homelessness, may our love be as unconditional as yours and hands bring hope through assistance.

Loving God, you call to us in the midst of life, in the midst of creation and we listen and we answer.

Through your call to serve may we bring your love into the lives of everyone we meet.

These prayers we offer as followers of the Jesus way. 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

Communion

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 call.

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 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,

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;

your blessing is on all people.

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

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 Spirit.

As we gather we offer you this bread and wine, gifts of your creation, through them, may we know
your presence, and in sharing them may we be filled with your love. Amen

At the end of their meal together Jesus took bread, and having given thanks, he broke it (break bread),
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.

Then Jesus took a cup of wine, gave thanks and said, 'this wine is the new covenant, whenever you
drink it remember me.' (Lift cup)

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.

Suggested hymn Go forth and be

Tune Woodlands - Listen [here](#)

Go forth and be
the person in your heart;
Gods' constant presence
share with all you meet.
Proclaim God's love
that is within us all,
that the whole world
may know his grace and peace.

Go forth and be
as Jesus to your friends;
share all you are
with those you love and know.
Be true to God
and all that you have learnt,
and live your life
in harmony and love.

Go forth and be
a child of God at heart;
each day a new
adventure to explore.
Lift up the stones
of life's experience,
and wonder at the
treasures found beneath.

Go forth and be
a pilgrim in the world;
share God's good gifts
with those along your street.
Live out your life
as love of God inspires,
your creative skills
for his sole glory use.

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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.