

## Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 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.

Eternal and ever-present God, as we gather together, we offer you our praise and thanksgiving.

**Suggested Hymn** Thank you for every new good morning  
Listen [here](#)

### Lord's Prayer

**Readings** Acts 8:26-40  
John 15:1-8

**Suggested Hymn** The kingdom of God is justice and joy  
Listen [here](#)

### Reflection

When we join the story in Acts 8, Philip has been preaching in Samaria, north of Jerusalem. He has a premonition; he must travel southwards on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Premonitions are strange experiences, a sense of knowing something you think you do not or should not know, perhaps a feeling to phone someone, to write to someone or as in Philip's case to do something. Tom Wright in his commentary on this passage tells of an experience whilst visiting Cambridge to give some lectures. As he prepared for the lectures a persistent thought came into his head that he should go to evensong in King's College. This was a strange feeling as he knew he would usually be more drawn to St John's College evensong, and he also still had a lot to do. However, the feeling persisted and at the last minute he decided to follow the feeling and thus entered the chapel just as the choir were processing. Looking for an empty seat, he quickly moved towards a seat on the end of pew and almost fell into it. As he gathered his thoughts a hand was placed on his arm and he turned and found himself face to face with an old friend and colleague from Texas. Neither had been in touch for a while and neither knew the other was in Cambridge. As the music began his friend pulled out his diary and showed a written message on that date that read 'Call Tom Wright'. A coincidence or a premonition.

Sometimes, we instinctively respond to such feelings and at other times we manage to tune out from the feeling or dismiss it as silly. Philip responds, I imagine he may be used to these feelings by now, and so he sets off in the direction indicated. He comes across a carriage, also travelling southwards and we are told he again 'knows' what to do. As he approaches, he hears someone in the carriage reading from the scriptures, and so, we are told, his opening line is 'do you understand what you are reading'. It is not the obvious opening line, but Luke has decided it suits his purpose in telling this story of how Philip engages with an Ethiopian returning from worshipping in Jerusalem, and shares the story of Jesus. We are not given any details of the conversation but as we read this we are left with a question; do we use the opportunities we are given to share how important the message of Jesus is to us?

Whatever Philip shared we can assume he mentioned baptism as the next twist in this tale comes as the carriage approaches some water, perhaps a river or lake, definitely more than a puddle, and the Ethiopian suggests Philip baptises him. This happens, and then our storyteller introduces another mystery – Philip disappears. I do wonder what the Ethiopian thought had happened, we are told that he went on his way rejoicing, whilst Philip finds himself in a coastal village north of Gaza, from here we are told he travels north to Caesarea, 50 miles north, preaching as he went. I am not sure I would be so resilient if I found myself suddenly in a completely different place. The writer of John's gospel also uses the motif of sudden change in various stories and from the perspective of quantum theology I would not rule out the possibility, but Luke implies this was not Philip's choice and that makes it slightly different.

Our passage from John does not involve any sudden changes, it is more about planned changes, and in particular a spot of gardening. Jesus likens himself to a vine, and suggests God is the vine grower. In many ways growing vines is an act of love, it takes patience and care, and vines must be pruned annually to create new growth on which the fruit will grow. Jesus, we read, suggests that if he is the vine then his followers are the branches, and this passage has been used often to help churches explore their mission. Just as the Acts passage leaves us with a question at a personal level, this passage leaves us with questions at a church level. What fruit have we produced recently? How many new things have we started in the last three years, new growth on which fruit may grow? What have we stopped doing, pruned, to make room for new ideas and initiatives, new growth?

One definition of insanity is to do the same thing again and again and expect a different outcome. As churches we can forget how time is passing and forget to consider our annual pruning. Covid has forced us into some new initiatives, but are we so desperate to get back to how things were before, that we might ignore the opportunity for new ideas that may come out of this experience? We are called to carry the message of Jesus to new places; Jesus and the disciples travelled to share the message, so why do we seem to think that staying in the same place, doing the same things is following the way of Jesus? Our building is not the main site of our discipleship, we are disciples wherever we go, at work, at the shops, at clubs and on our travels. Last week we sang the song, 'we are one in the Spirit' with the line 'and they'll know we are Christians by our love'. People should recognise our faith by our attitudes and our actions, and these things then become the invitation to share our story and the story of God's love.

Discipleship is about how we approach life, how we live, how we react, how we show love, and about how we share our hopes and dreams for a better world. We need to be rooted in God, just as Jesus was, connecting with God in such a way that we 'sense' right decisions like Philip in Acts 8, and we know the things to say, as Philip did with the Ethiopian, and we are open to possibilities and opportunities. I am often asked 'how can I hear God?' Few of us experience a booming voice telling us what to do it is more being in tune with an inner consciousness which I believe is connected to the collective consciousness which some call Spirit, some called God, and there are many other names used.

Brian McLaren in his book 'We make the road by walking' explores another trip to Caesarea which Jesus and the disciples took. He gives us an insight into the city, explaining that before Roman occupation it was known as Panias, and was a place of pilgrimage for worshippers of the Canaanite god Baal and later the Greek god Pan. When Herod the Great died control of the region passed to his son Herod Philip, who changed the name to Caesarea Philippi. McLaren asks us to imagine what it must have been like for Jesus and the disciples to enter this place, names after two influential leaders of the time whose beliefs were very different from his own, and he suggests modern equivalents might be a Jewish leader bringing followers to Auschwitz, or a Japanese leader to Hiroshima or a Palestinian leader to the wall of separation. It is here, in this difficult place, that Jesus asks the disciples what people are calling him, and then who do they think he is. It is quite a field trip but like all field trips it is designed by the teacher to take the students out of familiar surroundings, dislodge conventional thinking and invite a different perspective. Perhaps we should look at the pandemic through the lens of a field trip in that it had taken us out of our familiar surroundings of church, and it does invite us to a new perspective on what it means to be church.

Our experiences over the past year have changed things in ways we would never have considered but the important questions remain. Are we going to make full use of this opportunity to prune and create new growth? Are we ready to hear the call and respond, ready to share our experience of God with those we encounter along the way, in whatever setting? This is what it means to be a disciple. We let God's love change our attitudes and actions and in doing so we offer an invitation to others to ask questions, and through sharing our experience offer them a new perspective on their own experience and a new hope in their heart.

**Song**                      Lean in towards the light by Carrie Newcomer  
Listen [here](#)

## Prayers

Eternal God, your being spans all time and space, and beyond our comprehension of time and space, you know everything. At times we feel out of our depth and fearful of the future but resting in you and held in your love we need have no fear and there will always be a way forward. As we wrestle with the changes to our way of life may we rest in your presence and sense the way forward.

**God of all time and space, held in your presence may we sense your guiding light in our being.**

Loving God, you call us to be your disciples, to live our lives in love through our attitude and actions, but sometimes we feel overwhelmed by other emotions, and confused by our feelings. When we are fearful, we can shut down and shut you out, trusting instead in our own limited abilities and allowing our narrow understandings to rule our decisions. Instead, may we recognise our feelings and turn to you for strength, trusting in our oneness to lead us to a better decision and our love to open us to new possibilities. May we journey onwards always ready to share, to learn and to encourage one another.

**God of all time and space, held in your presence may we sense your guiding light in our being.**

As we worship together we reflect upon the stories in the news, stories of distress and disease, stories of injustice and unrest, of inequality and frustration. We feel frustration that nothing seems to change, yet at the same time feeling powerless to make change. You call us to love, may we recognise and draw strength from the knowledge that every act of kindness is like a pebble dropped in a pool, the action causes ripples to spread outwards changing the lives of people we may never meet. In our discipleship may we spread the seeds of love through our attitudes and our actions, offering a different perspective and fresh understanding, and being catalysts of change.

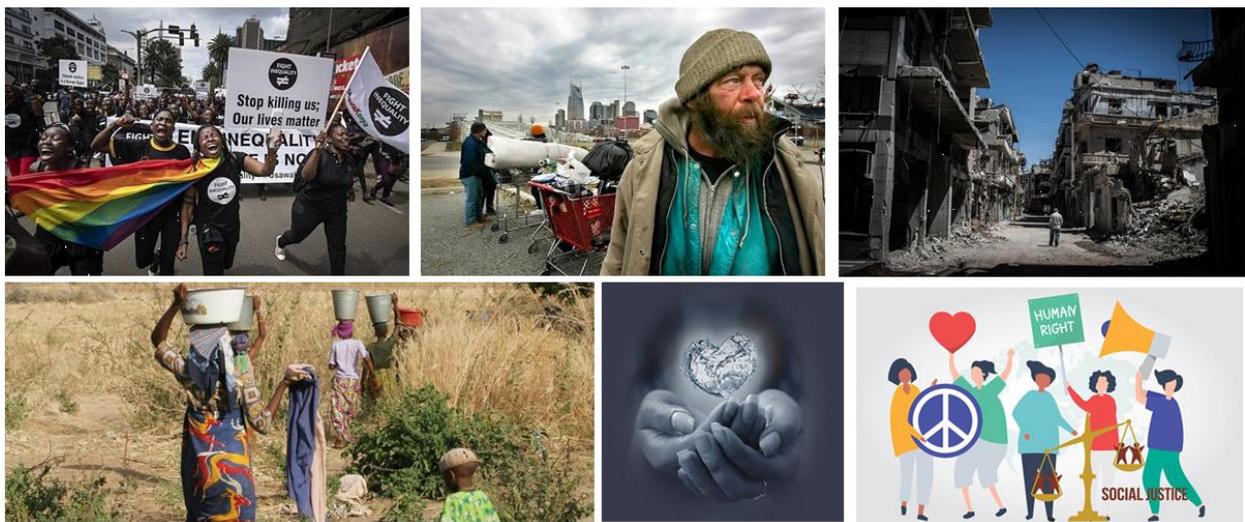
**God of all time and space, held in your presence may we sense your guiding light in our being.**

You call us to share the message of Jesus, the message of your unconditional love for all people, and all creation. As we look to the future may we explore new ways of sharing, new ways of building friendships and a place of belonging where all feel welcome and offered the opportunity to explore their humanity in the light of your love. Trusting in your presence we will find new ways and the words for sharing, trusting in your presence and working as one we can be the change the world needs.

**God of all time and space, held in your presence may we sense your guiding light in our being.**

Loving God, we offer you this time as we sit in the stillness and together pray for the world and your people, remembering the things that need to change so that all feel one and know your love and seeking your guidance for our actions.

Silence



**God of all time and space, held in your presence may we sense your guiding light in our being.**

May we take the time to share together all that we have felt and discovered so that we may encourage one another as we journey deeper and wider as pilgrims of love offering hope.

In Jesus' name. 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

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.

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.

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.

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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### 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.