

## Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2021

All material © Heather Whyte unless stated otherwise

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** Christ is alive

Listen [here](#)

### Prayer

Eternal God source of all being we come to you in prayer. We have heard your call and together we respond in praise and thanksgiving.

For the world in which we live, we thank you and pause to reflect on how the wonder of creation has filled our lives this week.

For the community in which we live, we thank you and pause to reflect on the people we have seen or spoken to, the gifts we have received and offered and the way you have spoken to us through people.

For our family and friends, we thank you and pause to reflect on the love we share, the way our lives mesh and form a community of love, the support we have received and the support we have offered and how you have opened our eyes to love through the experiences we have shared.

For our life together as church, we thank you and pause to reflect of our journey of faith together, the experiences we have shared, the encouragement we have received and offered, and the opportunities that await of the journey still to be travelled.

For the life and ministry of Jesus, we give you thanks and pause to reflect of the message of Jesus and the challenge it brings to our life as church and as disciples on the way.

### Lord's Prayer

**Reading** Psalm 1

Acts 1:15-17 & 21-26 (The Message)

**Suggested Hymn** Teach me, my God and King,  
Tune Sandys in all things thee to see,  
Listen [here](#) and what I do in anything  
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass  
on it may stay his eye;  
or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake:  
nothing can be so mean,  
which, with this tincture, 'For thy sake',  
will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
makes drudgery divine:  
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone  
that turneth all to gold:  
for that which God doth touch  
and own cannot for less be told.

GEORGE HERBERT (1593-1633) altd.

### Reflection

Psalm one reminds of the choices we have in life, and they are many, the major choices and thousands of minor choices each day which all affect the lives of those around us, and sometimes the lives of people we have never met and will probably never meet. We can choose for good, or we can choose for self which is not always the same.

In our reading from Acts we read of the choice made to replace Judas within the twelve. There is justification for the need to replace, there is the searching among the followers for nominations, then there is prayer, and then there is the drawing of straws to decide! This is the only way that the disciples can perhaps see to move the decision away from their own desires into God's decision, but it raises some interesting questions – should we be playing dice more in church meeting, or have we

moved on to a place where we leave head behind and trust the still small voice within to guide us? I am not sure of the answer.

We are aware of what happens next in this story and that these disciples will travel and sow seeds of the message of Jesus and eventually all the followers, those who heard Jesus and those who are introduced to the message of Jesus, will begin to form communities of encouragement and support, house churches, and later still we will witness what we know as the early church beginning to grow. The issue for me is that what results often does not reflect the message of Jesus, and possibly never has.

Through our journey of the past year, we have been given an opportunity to think about what it means to be church. Jesus did not intend to start a new religious order, but he did challenge the structure of the existing order seeing it as top heavy and over legalistic. In Acts we have the story of what happens after Jesus' death, how the disciples took his message of the Kingdom of God and inspired others to walk this new path. It is a message that can seem strange to those who, like me, grew up in the church for at its heart it is an exploration of how the world would be if God was in charge rather than the civil authorities, in other words the good news is about the Kingdom and not about the church. In our modern western world, the term Kingdom is often misunderstood, in most people's minds it is associated with knights and battles, castles and by definition masculinity. For Jesus the term was far from this, not at all geographical, and much more about a time of universality, almost the opposite of how we interpret the word.

Jesus invited people to live and work and build community, to recognise their oneness and their mutuality, and this would be a symbol of God's reign, which was already present and possible if humanity chose to see it. This idea paints a picture of something quite far-removed from the hierarchy that people see within church, a hierarchy which has been present from quite early on. The disciples did not plan it that way. In the early days there was a definite connection with Judaism but with the destruction of the temple in 70AD the followers of the way were forced to flee into the surrounding countries, and they attracted many more followers who had no connection to Judaism and almost inevitably the ties with the synagogue were broken and they began to call themselves *Ekklesia*, the assembly which in time became known as the church. As the numbers grew the need for organisation grew and probably without even realising it this new church became an organisation mirroring the structures of other organisations around at the time. When we talk of being countercultural, perhaps we need to look first at the nature of church itself, how we organise ourselves and what we reflect to the world around. We are Christians first and church second, our calling is to live and breathe the way of Jesus, to be a force for change, a movement of justice and church is our way of supporting each other in our calling, and together to discover more of what it means to be one with each other, one with creation and one with the source of all being, which we refer to as God. In our world, in which many are fighting for their place and sense of worth, we are to be a light, and a pattern of living in community where every person is important, where every person has something to offer and every person belongs, this is the message of Jesus and Jesus saw no place for authority structures. In Mark 10:42-45 we read, *'You know that the men who are considered to be rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great he must be the servant of the rest.'*

Jesus was a leader, but he did not see himself as having power over those he led, his leadership was one of sharing, nurturing and empowering, then he stepped back and let the disciples make their own decisions and their own mistakes, all the time being in the background with a word of love and encouragement; he called them his friends, and then he washed their feet. When we join the church, we have a part to play, we step into a model that should have community at its heart, not the community we are called to serve but the community we are as God's people. A model of the world as it would be if every human made the choice to live as one, the Kingdom of God.

Theologian Adrian B Smith wrote, *'if the structure of the Christian community (church), the language it uses, and the manner of its worship do not feed people's spiritual needs today, then it is presenting itself as an outdated culture of benefit to only a small minority of traditionalists.'* OUCH! When we become focussed on our structures are we forgetting our main purpose of being life-giving, are we forgetting God? Recent decades have seen a rise in people who turn from religion but identify with

the spiritual. For some they see no connection between church and spirituality and yet spirituality, the physical and psychological aspect of our humanity that prompts wonder, a search for meaning and a move towards a higher self in relationship to the transcendent, is enmeshed in our understanding of the message of Jesus. So how can we change things, how can we show people the connection?

Bishop John Spong wrote, *'The task of the church becomes less that of indoctrinating or relating people to an external divine power and more that of providing opportunities for people to touch the infinite centre of all things and to grow into all they are destined to be.'* If we are to be a sign for the world, it is to be a sign that there is a different set of values by which we are invited to live – the values of Jesus in the context of the reign of God. We are to demonstrate a world driven by spiritual values rather than a world driven by greed, individualism, economics and power, the things which create injustice, inequality and a sense of not being of any worth.

We are called, as every age of Christianity has been called, to re-express the vision of Jesus in the cultural terms of our day, in a way which is relevant and appeals to people struggling with anxiety, desperation, insecurity and confusion. Can we do that? I believe we can, but it will take courage to let go of our inheritance as church and become community. A place of sharing, exploring, journeying and above all belonging. A place where we use wonder and a search for meaning to create opportunities of connection that draw all who come to their higher self and a relationship with the source of all being. When we make the decision to join the church, we make promises, including the promise to play our part in the life of the church, to take seriously the responsibilities and privileges of membership. For some there will be specific tasks such as Eldership, Preaching or ordained ministry but we are all called to exercise our gifts and talents for the life of the community and to benefit our mutual journey. That promise was at the heart of the early church, it was at the centre of why we have the story of Acts. Throughout the years churches have repeated the Nicene Creed but it was penned over 1500 years ago, what should our creed look like today as a community of the way of Jesus? I offer you an idea and invite you to say this together.

**We believe in the message of Jesus and are called to witness to the power of possibility that is God's Reign in the world.**

**Together we will:**

- **Learn more about God, more about ourselves and more about what we believe.**
- **Worship and pray**
- **Study the bible and discern its wisdom for our world today**
- **Care for one another**
- **Share – time, money, and talents**
- **Discover more about life on the way of Jesus, and its message for our world today**
- **Learn how to make the best choices**
- **Learn how to be generous in a world that consumes more and more**
- **Learn to respect one another and honour others for their story and their sense of place**
- **Take seriously our responsibility for creation**
- **Live responsibly, encouraging sustainable living, and demonstrating justice and peace in our choices**
- **Use our personal experiences to create a place of experience for others**

**Suggested hymn**

Listen [here](#)

God's Spirit is in my heart

## **Prayers**

Loving God you have given us free will. In all things there is choice; to be one with creation or apart from creation; to be one with all people or apart from all people; to belong or not belong.

When we choose to be one, we are bound in love,  
for our world,  
for each other,  
for you, the source of all being.  
In giving we receive, and our lives are fulfilled.

When we choose to be apart we become bound by fear, seeing others against us, learning to defend our ground, hoarding what we perceive to be ours. We do not know which way to turn.

**Loving God, where there is choice may we seek our highest choice, choosing love as our path.**

We pray together for our world knowing that you are a part of all that is and seeking your guidance as we build a place of hope and peace for all. You have called us through Jesus, and we follow the way, recognising the importance of love and acceptance in building your Kingdom. Where people are burdened by injustice and inequality may our choices lessen the burden and our life together challenge the choices which feed injustice and inequality.

**Loving God, where there is choice may we seek our highest choice, choosing love as our path.**

As we worship together, we lift to you our life as church and pray for wisdom and courage as we make decisions for the future. Recognising the treasures of the past may we be bold in creating a church for today. Recognising the many ways in which we have experienced your presence may we be creative in offering experiences to others who are searching for more in their life. Recognising our own sense of belonging may we be open and welcoming to others and reach out to them where they are in love.

**Loving God, where there is choice may we seek our highest choice, choosing love as our path.**

As we journey together we offer you our stories, our hopes and our dreams, but also our fears. The times when we are overwhelmed, when we lack confidence and when we know we have not chosen the highest option. Your love is full of grace, you invite us to journey and you forgive us and invite us to forgive each other. Within the community of church may we model your gracious love and encourage one another through our sharing and our learning together, putting aside our perceived failures and through our mistakes growing in wisdom.

**Loving God, where there is choice may we seek our highest choice, choosing love as our path.**

In our living may our choices show our faith. May our decisions bring balance to creation and maintain the life you have created, a life of generosity and wonder, a life of opportunity and the encouragement to explore possibilities, a life of love. Giving thanks for all we have received may we be gifting people, sharing what we have with those who have need and seeing and sensing new opportunities to create oneness and harmony through our sharing.

We pause to reflect on the stories that we have heard this week and to listen for your Spirit guiding our decisions and actions.

**Loving God, where there is choice may we seek our highest choice, choosing love as our path.**

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**      Living God your joyful Spirit

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.