

Sunday 25th July 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 Great is thy faithfulness

Listen [here](#)

Prayer

Loving God, ever present, ever faithful, as we gather in the name of Jesus, we come to praise you and give thanks. Every day we are surrounded by messages of your love, in the blessing of a new day, in the friendship of others, in the opportunities to be inspired, and in the challenges that help us grow. When we live in your love, and journey on the way of Jesus, we know that everything we need is provided and we thank you.

Our world is your joyful creation, with its variety of species and climate. Each season brings something different and whilst we may have favourites, we know that we need the gifts of each season to make our planet the source of life. We know we need day and night, times of activity and times of relaxation, and we thank you for the variety of life.

Every day we make choices and recognise that they are not always the wisest choice, but you love surrounds us in good times and bad, and your mercy has no end. In unconditional love we find forgiveness, and in response we seek to learn from our mistakes and share your love more faithfully. Eternal and loving God for your love and mercy we give your thanks and praise, and in the guidance of the Spirit we find our hope for tomorrow.

Lord's Prayer

Reading Psalm 14 (Psalms for a quantum world)

Some say there is no God,
and show no love in their actions.
Some love but still do not understand
the oneness of humanity and creation.
The eternal presence, source of all being,
knows all, is aware of all and unites all.
Why can we not understand this?
Why do we hurt one another?
Why do we live in fear?
In you there is only love,
and love banishes fear.
In you is justice through oneness,
in hurting others, we hurt ourselves.
When we acknowledge our oneness
we find peace, seek justice and know love.
We are restored to wholeness,
and our humanity flourishes,
Let us be one and rejoice.

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Reading Ephesians 3:14-21 (Living Bible)

Suggested hymn The love of God is broad like beach and meadow

Listen [here](#)

Reading John 6:1-21 (NRSV)

Suggested Song We cannot own the sunlit skies

Listen [here](#)

Reflection

The lectionary this week gives us one of those Sundays when a reading is the same as the previous week but from a different source. Last week we listened to Mark's version of the feeding of the 5000, and this week we have John's version of the same story. The first thing to do is play spot the difference, then think about why the difference to attempt to uncover why the author wrote it the way he (and in this case it probably is a 'he') wrote it.

We start with the preamble to the main story. John gives us more geographical details and mentions it was near Passover, which may give a clue to the timing of the event, at least in John's mind. Mark tells us that Jesus had compassion and began teaching immediately whereas John does not mention Jesus teaching the crowd. John is written later than Mark and the early church was more established and more familiar with the story and its interpretation, John was offering a different interpretation and so setting the scene is important as it helps people imagine what was happening. Mark was written not long after the first churches were established, and he is writing largely for gentile Christians so they would have been less familiar with the significance of words like Passover but needed more of a prompt that what followed was part Jesus' teaching.

Moving on to the main event, the account of the feeding of the 5000, in Mark it is late in the day, after the teaching, when the disciples bring up the question of the crowd needing fed, suggesting that Jesus send them away to find food in the neighbouring villages. Instead, Jesus says they are to feed them which raises many questions, where will they get enough bread for this crowd, how will they pay for it and how will they carry it? Imagine being asked to find bread for 5000 people? Jesus answers by asking how much bread they have, and the answer is five loaves, and two fish. The rest of this part of the story is the same as in John. So, how does John approach the feeding differently? As soon as Jesus saw the crowd gathering his first thought seems to have been feeding them and he asks Philip where they are going to buy the bread to feed all the people. We are told he asked this to test Philip as he already knew what he was going to do. Philip's first thought is the cost of feeding all these people, and one of the other disciples, somewhat jokingly says there is a boy with five loaves and two fishes perhaps that would feed the crowd. It is a ridiculous idea, but we know that is exactly what happened.

I wonder if John wanted to make the point that Jesus' first thought was the care of the crowd in terms of hospitality, before he had thought of any teaching, indeed the feeding of the 5000 was the teaching for the crowd as well as for us in John. It is a model repeated in many stories, Jesus sits down to eat with people as a way of getting to know them. Often the church expects people to engage with the teaching before a relationship is built, the Markan model of this story, but although Mark tells us about the compassion of Jesus it is in John that we see real pastoral care for the crowd. Hospitality without conditions is a true example of the unconditional grace of God of which Jesus spoke.

Now we come to the conclusion of the day, and I will begin with Mark's version. Jesus sends the disciples back to the boat while he dismisses the crowd, then he goes to pray on the mountain. Meanwhile the disciples are struggling to row in a choppy sea, against the wind. We are told Jesus 'sees' them struggling although I suspect 'senses' may be a better interpretation, and he starts to walk across the sea as if it was his intention all along, indeed we are told that he intended to bypass the disciples in the boat but they see him. At first, they think it is a ghost, a natural assumption given the circumstances, but drawing near Jesus reassures them, then gets in the boat with them. Imagine a day where you see someone feed 5000 people with five loaves and two fish, then you see someone walking on the water in the middle of a choppy sea, how would you have felt?

John's version has some differences. We are told that Jesus' senses' the intentions of the crowd and wished to avoid any difficulty, so he breaks things up by withdrawing on his own, he leaves the scene and the disciples. With no sign of Jesus, the crowd begin to leave and then the disciples get into a boat, maybe the one they arrived in, and set off across the sea. It is dark and a wind blows up making it difficult to row. The dark, the waves, their tiredness it was all too much and then they see Jesus walking on the sea, walking on top of the waves towards them. They are afraid, and who would blame them, but again Jesus reassures them but there the story changes because we are told they 'wanted to take him into the boat' and immediately they found themselves on the shore. Their desire was so strong to be safe on the shore that it happened. There are many occurrences in John which relate to a

modern day understanding of our quantum world and this is one of them. There is sense in which the author of John seems to have understood the message of Jesus in a deeper way than the other gospel writers and attempts to point his readers to this deeper meaning, this sense of oneness with creation.

Many writers through the ages have pointed to this deeper meaning, Hildegard of Bingen, John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, John Donne but for the main part the church has taken the orthodox route of the synoptic gospels which is to my mind rather a shame. This particular story is one of the few that appears in all four gospels which makes it a central feature of the story, it occurs in the lectionary at least once a year and it has within it a core message of sharing, trusting and in John, being one. I wonder how we would expect this story to happen in our modern world, what would be the setting, what would they share – five big macs and two portions of fries – and where would it be set? It is an important question because it informs how we might replay this story to share the message of God's unconditional love.

Some years ago, there was a video circulated asking the question what if Starbucks was marketed like the church, it raises some interesting questions about hospitality.

Video – watch [here](#)

It is a tongue in cheek video which uses a particular type of church as its model, but there are little things that we can all learn. Welcoming is important, but welcoming in a gentle, genuine way, recognising and relating to the feelings of someone visiting somewhere for the first time. They do not want to be in the spotlight, and they also need to be able to find things without having to ask all the time. How well do we signpost facilities within our churches? It is all part of the welcome. Then there is approaching people, often we rush to get their details and it can feel as if you are signing up for something when all you want is to get a feel for a place. It is good to introduce yourself and ask for a first name so that a first step in relationship happens and encouraging people to sign a visitor's book if they wish, or having cards available, which can double as gift aid forms for those making an offering, is fine but anything too face to face can put people off on a first visit. The other aspect to be aware of is that we need to introduce what we are doing so a visitor feels more at ease. One church I know used to put something at the top of the weekly newsheet explaining the normal routine of worship, things like standing as the Bible is brought in, standing to sing, standing as the offertory was brought forward and remaining standing after the final hymn (this latter does mean training those leading worship to announce the final hymn). It helps to avoid visitors playing catch up and feeling increasingly uneasy, which will make it less likely that they return.

In our reading from Ephesians which is Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus, a prayer which stands the test of time, he uses the phrase 'more than all we can ask or imagine'. Think back to John's description of the disciples in the boat and the quantum notion of imagining something and desiring it so strongly that it becomes the reality we experience. Jesus encouraged people to use their imagination through the technique of parables, stories and answering a question with a question. He wanted people to discover their own, God-given, belief, and through the exercise of discernment to change their approach to life. It is the modern way of education. Do we use our imagination enough when it comes to envisioning the church for today? If we have not imagined something different it will never happen!

Covid has meant doing things differently. It is a prompt to begin imagining what the future might look like, and that does not have to be negative, but it probably does have to be different. Around most of our churches there are communities which even before Covid held many lonely people, and now even more. How might we be a place of unconditional hospitality, a place of conversations, welcome and questions? How might we enable questions to happen within our churches? Most of you will have heard me talk about using our wall space and noticeboards more creatively, using pictures, poetry and book/newspaper quotes as points of connection and wondering, asking people what they think of something or sharing how we feel about a place, how we recognise God's presence in a certain place. Anybody using our building is invited to think differently about God, or to engage in mindfulness or contemplation about their own actions and to go deeper into themselves. However, there are many other things we can do, for example having questions on menus or coasters when we have a meal or

coffee together, open questions about life that can begin a conversation, begin a relationship and lead to other questions. There is a company who provide boxes of such questions, examples being -

- If you could sit for an hour and enjoy any view in the world, where would it be?
- If you could call anyone in the world right now, who would you contact and why?
- What is the best song to dance to?

We need to be more creative in how we do church and now is the opportunity to explore ideas. There are many pioneer churches who have a monthly pattern of worship that involves traditional worship, dinner worship, forest worship, quiet worship, café worship in some combination. We are going to struggle to find people to lead traditional worship on all the Sundays we plan in church so perhaps we could be daring and open up in a different way, reaching out to the community and offering that place of company, contemplation and curiosity about creation. It may be more relevant to many more people, and we have little to lose. What might Jesus ask of the church today? He argued that the Pharisees and Scribes were making it too difficult for people to know God with their rules, their practices and their traditions and I suspect the same things can be said of the church today. We have allowed orthodoxy to stifle imagination, and tradition to become static instead of growing with new generations. It is time to get back to the Jesus way in our approach to being church, as well as life.

Suggested Hymn

Tune Streets of Laredo

Listen [here](#)

The Kingdom of God will be fair and be loving,
everyone having as much as they need;
no hunger or thirst, just a sharing and caring
where everyone's valued for all that they bring.

The Kingdom of God will be justice and freedom,
everyone sharing so all can grow strong;
no envy or fighting, no greedy dictators,
instead all will flourish because we are one.

The Kingdom of God shows a new way of living,
changing our values and outlook on life;
we're called to be one with all neighbours and strangers,
remembering others in all we decide.

Heather Whyte 2019

Prayers

Eternal God, source of all being, we rest in your presence and offer you our prayers, sharing our concerns through our commitment to the way of Jesus. We pray for the people who are struggling with challenges that feel threatening and overwhelming. We think of those whose lives are threatened by Covid and whose families are anxious and feel powerless. We think of health workers who face another tide of Covid, treating those fighting the disease and caring for their families, many of whom have not had holidays and who feel sapped of energy and struggle to face tomorrow. May they feel your presence and know your strength within them, bringing them light and hope. As we pray for the NHS, we commit ourselves to practising and advocating keeping safe in love for one another.

In your love, may our actions bring change and hope for the world.

As we seek to live in oneness, we pray for all who find themselves displaced, refugees of war and famine struggling to find their place in a strange land having often faced danger and death in their attempt to reach a new freedom. We pray for the people who commit themselves to reaching out to the stranger and offering help to those whose lives have been turned upside down by circumstances over which they had no control. We pray for a world in which there are no refugees, and all sense their belonging in your universal oneness. As we pray for your kingdom to come, we commit to being catalysts for change and challengers of the status quo.

In your love, may our actions bring change and hope for the world.

Creator God, we pray for your creation and seek forgiveness for the times when we have been neglectful of the earth. We pray for the people who shout out against pollution, the plundering of rainforests, and the practices which put convenience over care. We pray for those who seek to

conserve and preserve the amazing diversity of life on the planet, risking hostility and harm in their attempt to raise awareness of how our actions are affecting life on earth. As we pray for our world we commit to taking all necessary steps to become people and churches whose footprint is light, and whose actions are loving.

In your love, may our actions bring change and hope for the world.

As we look to a new normal within our country and our churches we pray for vision and imagination. Your spirit, which holds us as one, surrounds us with prompts and opportunities which we often fail to recognise in our determination to keep going. Loving God may we open our eyes to the possibilities, may we allow ourselves space to imagine and may we have the courage to do things differently. In a time of loneliness and isolation may our buildings become an oasis of hope and a greenhouse of relationships.

In your love, may our actions bring change and hope for the world.

Loving God within our fellowships and families, and within the communities in which we live, people are facing challenges. May all who are grieving a loss, those who are undergoing treatment or awaiting results of test, those who are struggling with isolation and loneliness or frailty and a loss of a familiar way of life, sense your presence around them and know in their hearts that they are not alone. In the silence we name those we each know personally.

Silence

Recognising your call to be people of oneness guided by the way of Jesus, we commit to being prophets of love and pioneers of change, and to share our understandings and beliefs with family and friends, encouraging a different way, and growing in our humanity through the strength of our oneness with each other, with creation and in you.

In your love, may our actions bring change and hope for the world.

In oneness we pray. Amen.

Offertory

As we worship 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 song

Tune Hyfrydol

Listen [here](#)

In the world God's life declaring
wisdom dances in delight;
all earth's hope and passion sharing
ways and truths beyond our sight.
In creation's heavenly glory,
all the power of love is shown;
in the telling of earth's story.
God's redeeming grace is known.

When we reach out to the stranger,
offering welcome and embrace;
then the Christ of cross and manger
shines in every human face.
In our hands outstretched in greeting,
all the strength of love is shown;
in the openness of meeting,
Christ's compassion is made known.

In our search for fairer giving,
we discern the Spirit's call;
in the struggle for Just living,
God demands no less than all.
In our speaking, in our doing,
all the hope of love is known;
in our dream of earth's renewing
Holy Wisdom shall be known.

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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.