

## Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> August 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**            Guide me O thou great Jehovah

Listen [here](#)

### Prayer

Loving God we gather in your presence and bring to you our praise and thanksgiving.

We praise you for the wonders of creation and the world on which we depend, for the seasons and days and the way creation works as one, holding all life in unity and supporting the diversity which feeds and nurtures. We praise you for each new day that dawns, for the sun that warms and the rain that refreshes and the combination of the two which add sparkle and wonder in the midst of the ordinary.

As we praise, we offer our thanks for creation and our place within it, for the seasons and the days which add variety to our lives, and the opportunities that each new day offers to build new relationships and deepen our knowledge. We thank you for the people in our lives, friends and family and those who provide the things we need, and we thank you for the fellowship of the church and the journey we make together following the way of Jesus, made possible through the ministry of Jesus. In fellowship here and with Christians around the world we offer the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples as we say together...

Lord's Prayer

**Readings**                            **Ezekial 37:1-14**

**Suggested hymn**                    Amazing Grace

Listen [here](#)

**Reading**                                **Colossians 3:12-17**

**Suggested hymn**                    Lord of all hopefulness

Listen [here](#)

### Reflection

Some years ago, I was invited to open an art exhibition called 'Bald Statement, a good grief'. It was an exhibition of nine heads sculpted from alabaster each depicting a different facet of grief. The exhibition was held in Bude URC, and I was also invited to preach at their service on the Sunday which prompted much thought on the nature of grief.

The pandemic from which we are hopefully emerging has left behind much grief. Grief is the mind's response to loss, and there has been too much loss during the past eighteen months, loss of life and loss of livelihood, loss of security and loss of confidence, and so there is grief in our communities. When you are in the midst of grief there is often little that feels good, so the sub-title of this exhibition raises instant questions. It was a very personal exhibition, the artist Jean Parker, produced the sculptures during her own experience of grief as she journeyed through treatment for cancer. Like all such journeys the experience was unique to Jean, however through her sculptures many people have explored their own journey through grief and many conversations have been enabled. Seeing grief as a journey helps to place a new perspective on life. For Jean, owning her grief allowed her to journey with it and ensured a fruitful outcome.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross explains grief as, 'a natural emotion, that part of you which allows you to say goodbye when you don't want to say goodbye; to express the sadness within you at the experience of any kind of loss.' Grief is not simply sadness, it is a myriad of mixed emotions but for centuries society did not know how to deal with emotions and people were encouraged not to indulge in emotion and where it occurred to suppress it, in Britain it was, and still is to some extent, epitomised by the phrase 'a stiff upper lip'. With a stiff upper lip, it is difficult to show emotion.

There are five recognised natural emotions, which if suppressed become unnatural emotions. Grief, anger, envy, fear, and love are natural reactions to life's experiences but if they are suppressed or denied they become unnatural emotions – depression, rage, jealousy, panic, and possessiveness – all of which cause illness and a breakdown in relationships resulting a loss of oneness. Grief does not go away, but we do learn to live with it and as we learn to journey with it so new experiences diminish the role it plays in our everyday life.

In our reading from Ezekial, the Israelites were in exile, removed from all they knew, Jerusalem their faith-centre ransacked and destroyed. They could not see any recognisable future, a natural response in grief, and they are dispirited, have lost hope, and cannot see a future path. Ezekial's vision describes their situation – life is over, they are dead and returning to dust. Then the vision offers hope, not a restoration of the life they knew but a new creation, a new hope. Often the process of grief moves us along a spiritual path of re-creation as we discover new things about ourselves that reveal new possibilities. When we do not deal with grief, do not journey through grief accepting help where necessary, then we can become a prisoner of grief.

Let me share with the story of a lady I knew; I have changed the names in this story but everything else is true. Edith grew up in a community made up of those who had and those that worked for those that had. Edith worked in service until her marriage to Mr Jones. Mr Jones was working class, but he had skills that made him a very useful person, as a tradesman and handyman he was well respected for his willingness to help others and he had a place within the community. As Mrs Jones, Edith became part of that place, her identity became wrapped up in her marriage and her husband's status. When her husband died, she lost everything, her husband, and her place in the community. She never came to terms with the loss and was a prisoner in her grief for the remaining twenty years that she lived. Edith told me that every night of those twenty years she prayed to God that she he would take her, she could see no purpose for her life, and every morning she awoke disappointed and trapped. Edith told me she even considered suicide. Edith's story is not unique, she felt unable to accept help any more than she could accept her loss and was isolated by her overwhelming grief.

Author, Suzanne Conway wrote about her own experience of grief in her book 'This I Know', in which she charts her discovery that grief gives an opportunity to re-connect and find true self. As we journey through life, we inherit roles and labels and our true self can be lost beneath them, even within our faith we can find ourselves labelled. In the depth of her grief journey Suzanne recognised the reality of this and explored unravelling the layers, letting go in the best possible way, untangling knots that held her back, unwrapping the hidden and forgotten gifts and unearthing the potential that has always been within to become her true self. Her book invites us all to explore this process, wherever we are in our journey. It is never too late, but it requires courage and probably help. Could we become places of comfort and exploration for those in our communities who are journeying through grief? Offering a place of company and conversation we could help connect people with those who offer specific expertise, as well as sharing our own experiences and offering the tools which we have found helpful. Sometimes a place to talk about our loss and be encouraged to remember is what is important, and we could offer that.

Our faith can be threatened in grief, loss of any kind can make us question what we believe, perhaps for the first time and if we find holes it can feel as if we are losing our faith. We are not, we are simply re-evaluating what we believe, and that is okay. Questions are okay, they are part of our spiritual journey and the road to fulfilment. Hope is an openness to change, an openness to something beyond our current experience and it produces a living faith that sustains no matter what life throws our way.

Our spiritual journey is about re-connecting, about recognising that we are part of all that is, connected to creation in an uplifting and empowering way. Quantum science is revealing much more about our connectedness and in the teaching of Jesus, I believe we find references to this connectedness. Following the Jesus way is about connection, relationship, and journeying, it is about hope and discovering true self. Jesus did not start the church, but his teaching of a new way led to followers gathering to support one another through all of life's emotions, being there for one another and exploring together a new understanding of humanity and personhood. As Paul encourages new churches, he tries to describe this and our reading from Colossians is one attempt. He speaks of unconditional love, of freedom that comes with acceptance and thinking the best of others rather

than expecting the worst. Forgiveness is about moving beyond prejudice into the oneness of God, and this brings peace. Faith does not make us immune to loss and grief, we all know that, but within the oneness of God we can know we are not alone, and together we can help each other to journey through to a new expression of self which does not deny the experience of grief but places it within the bigger picture and allows us to become a new expression of wholeness.

Loss is a natural part of life, when we live in the now, which is what Jesus encouraged us to do, then every day we lose something because if we did not let go of what had been we could not live the now. John O'Donohue explores loss and grief in his book 'eternal echoes', and says, 'absence is the longing for something that is gone. Loss is the hole that it leaves'. I wonder if we can truly feel absence without a sense of belonging, of being in relationship. Embracing our grief allows us to belong to that experience of changing states which in turn will enable us to be at rest in a new belonging. Loss and discovery are partners, loss throws us out of our normal, our place of belonging, and it is painful, disruptive, and full of different emotions, but it is a journey to a new way of being and unless we let go of the past expression of relationship we deny and prevent a new expression of relationship emerging. An expression that will bring a new way of being and a new way of knowing the person or thing which we have lost. Jesus, in John's gospel, says to Mary, 'do not hold on to me', the old way of knowing Jesus was over but a new way was to emerge, the resurrection shows a new relationship that is deeper and broader than anything before, the sense of knowing Jesus' presence in the eternal experience of life. When we believe in the resurrection then we know we are never alone and never separated from those whose physical presence we have lost, for in letting go we find that eternal experience of love.

The pandemic has brought a sense of loss to all of us, the loss of freedom and security but for some people it has also brought the loss of loved ones. As we have been in this pandemic together so we should journey together through the grief of loss, supporting those who are hurting and offering hope to those who feel bereft. We are God's people, we have a special message of love to share and here and now we have an opportunity to re-connect and through an offering of God's love share with our communities the journey to a new beginning. That, I believe, is our call in this new age.

As a result of my exploration of grief following the exhibition, I wrote some reflections on the different emotions experienced during grief. If you would like to read these, you can find them [here](#)

**Suggested Hymn**      Come and find the quiet centre  
Listen [here](#)

### **Prayers**

Loving God, in our prayer time we pause to remember the people known to us who have died during the pandemic, and to hold in prayer those who are journeying through grief.

Silence

Within our communities are many people who are grieving, and we pray that they may sense your presence with them in their pain and be able to recognise the offering of love through the support and help of family, friends and colleagues. As we chart our path forward may we find creative ways to be a place of comfort and hope within our communities. We think especially of the community of Plymouth and the churches within that community who are seeking to offer help and support in a time of community grief.

**Loving God held within your love may we have the courage to reach out in love and share a message of hope.**

As we pray together we think of daily statistics that represent pain and loss through Covid and we pray that we will always remember that the numbers are people and represent a measure of the grief and loss experienced within our country. May we also remember that this is only a small part of the loss suffered within communities and continue to pray for those affected by this pandemic. May we find new and creative ways to support those we are struggling with loss of any kind, and use our resources to support those who can help when we cannot.

**Loving God held within your love may we have the courage to reach out in love and share a message of hope.**

As we think of the world in which we live we recognise the many different ways in which loss affects the lives of your people. We think of Haiti and loss of homes and livelihoods on top of the loss of life; we think of the people who have lost homes as a result of floods and wild fires; we think of those fleeing dangerous and threatening situations, in Afghanistan, Syria, Belarus and other places. May churches offer help and hope, through support of aid agencies and by being open to the needs of those who are seeking refuge. We think especially of those working within our own communities to rehome and offer support to those who arrive in need.

**Loving God held within your love may we have the courage to reach out in love and share a message of hope.**

Loving God there is loss within all our lives and a longing for love. We pray through the words of the song 'There is a longing in our heart'. (Listen [here](#))

**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**            One more step along the world I go  
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.