

Sunday 27th March 2022

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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,
we worship together in God.

Suggested hymn Thank you for every new good morning

Listen [here](#)

Prayer

Eternal God ever present in creation, we offer you our praise and thanksgiving.

You are the creator of all that we know and all that we have yet to discover, the stars in and beyond our galaxy, the planets which orbit the stars, and life itself in myriad forms.

You are the sustainer of life, the Spirit indwells all life even when it is not recognised, the Spirit binds and connects life.

You bring forth new life and in the knowledge of you we are constantly invited to see life anew, to live life to the fullness of our humanity and to live life lovingly.

In Jesus we find our way, our model of the fullness of humanity, our guide for the choices we make.

Loving God, for all this we offer you our thanks, and we thank you for this new day, and the many people who will support us this day and every day.

Our Father....

Readings Joshua 5:9-12

Luke 15:11b – 31

Suggested hymn Father God I wonder

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Story You are all my favourites by Sam McBratney

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Reflection

The move from a wilderness people, existing on manna, to a settled people living on the produce of the land and the harvest of their labours was an evolution. It did not happen instantly. This excerpt from Joshua is a reminder of Israel's journey but also that life is a journey for all of us with periods of wilderness living and periods of settled living. During the pandemic it has felt to many like wilderness living with everything we knew unsettled and disrupted but now we are beginning to settle again and yet it feels very much like a new land and we are having to learn to rely on ourselves again. One aspect of this is that during the past two years we have worshipped together on zoom and not had to worry about filling the pulpit but as we move into this new land we have to take up that responsibility again and yet it is not the same as it was before, we are harvesting new land with new crops which may need new seed to suit that new land. So, our journey of discovery continues. When we commit to a new way, or a new land, we cannot keep looking back, we have to look forward and see things differently. It is the same when we suddenly realise we are on the wrong path; journeying means change, a change of heart, a change of mindset, a change of outlook and a change of vision. All those things are aspects of repentance. Our connection with God is always and forever but sometimes our outlook means we choose to ignore the connection. There are times when this choice is driven by guilt, we know we have chosen badly, we may have hurt others and we have probably hurt ourselves and we judge God as we judge ourselves and wrongly believe we will not be forgiven and so we hide away. God's grace goes beyond human frailties and unconditional forgiveness is at the heart of God's love. In God there is always a new beginning.

Our reading from Luke's gospel is possibly the most familiar parable, the cosiest and most reassuring but perhaps that is because we are misreading it and have done for a long time. I am reading a book

by Trevor Dennis, a wonderful storyteller and insightful Old Testament academic, it is called *The Gospel beyond the Gospels* and I would like to share with you some of the insights I have gleaned through reading Trevor's take on this parable. Parables were an important tool in Jesus' ministry, he also was a wonderful storyteller but with the parables he often left unanswered questions, and in pondering those questions we discover connections and discern answers that are deeply spiritual. Parables are not about informing us, their intention is to inspire, challenge, and change us.

We have been taught to call this the story of the Prodigal Son but perhaps that has been the start of the misleading for really this is a story about two brothers rather than one or even two sons, it explores sibling rivalry, and the cast of the story is small. Jesus grew up within the Jewish faith, he listened to the great stories of the Torah, stories of sibling rivalry from Cain and Abel to Jacob and Esau and on to Joseph. He witnessed how rivalry was tearing communities and families apart and so he tells a story. In the story of Jacob and Esau, Jacob tricks his father Isaac into giving him Esau's birth right as the elder brother. Imagine Isaac's feelings when he discovered what had happened. He probably felt humiliated and that is what the younger brother does to his father here, he humiliates him. We are meant to be shocked at this lack of honouring his father, his actions are to all intents saying I wish you were dead. But the father does not act in the way we might expect and instead we are told he divides his life, himself, between his sons. The word used in the Greek is *bios*, meaning life. Trevor Dennis asks us to wonder if this act hints at favouritism in that by agreeing to the request the father is choosing the younger son.

The commandment to honour your father and your mother implies caring for them in their old age but in this story the younger son takes his inheritance and leaves not just home but the country, he moves away. Then he squanders all his money leaving him with no material means of caring for his father in the future. He finds himself cut-off from family, friends and local community in a land without the laws of his own people which impel caring for the other. He plans his return, preparing a speech designed to show repentance but whilst in the speech he accepts he has wronged his father and so deserves to be disowned Trevor asks us to note that he continues to use the word, Father. Should we be suspicious of his motives in giving this speech, does it show any real remorse? Very different from the speech Jacob made to Esau when they were reunited. This son's speech is, it seems, designed to win his father round, using the words he believes his father wants to hear, it is about self-interest rather than reconciliation.

As the son returns we are told the Father is waiting and watching and the actions Jesus puts in the story have echoes of Isaiah 65 where we read God speak to Israel, 'I held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices... who sit inside tombs, and spend the night in secret places; who eat swine flesh.' However, Jesus goes further, and the father runs to greet his son. We are meant to be astonished. The father offers love and forgiveness before the son had opened his mouth; indeed, the father does not seem to hear the words he is so busy calling for the servants to bring sandals and robes and to get the barbecue going. If this were indeed a story about a prodigal son it would end there and we would be satisfied with a perfect ending but this story is about two brothers and so act two erupts on to the stage.

The father calls for sandals, a sign that his son is not a slave and then he calls for a robe and a ring which indicates far more, this is power dressing and so we must wonder where this leaves the elder son. Perhaps that suggestion of favouritism creeps back into our minds along with a prickle of disquiet. Could this be Joseph's coat of many colours again, is it a symbol of the covering Jacob used to trick Isaac, where is this story going. We soon find out.

The elder brother has been out in the fields working and no knows nothing about what has happened. No one bothered to call him in to the party – how would you feel? Here we are faced with sibling rivalry and we shouldn't be surprised. Everything he had felt when his younger brother left with a portion of his inheritance, left him to care for his father, comes flooding back along with

the conviction that his brother is indeed the favourite. He refuses to join the party. He refuses to play his part, to take his place at his father's side and welcome his brother.

His father comes out to beg him to join the party, the word used is a strong word. What we are asked to note is that the father comes to the elder brother just as he ran to greet the younger brother. He once again throws aside his own honour, but this time is met with raw anger and hurt. In the words of the story we sense that he cannot meet his father's eye, he feels rejected and cut off from all he has known, he does not refer to his brother as his brother and separates himself from all notions of belonging. He sates how he sees things bluntly, making accusations he cannot actually prove or know.

The father replies with perhaps the greatest punchline – 'Dear child, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours.'

Jesus has been playing with his listeners, he has created a father they perceive as a fool and now he unravels it all with one sentence. The words 'Dear Child' shows the father does not have favourites, he has treated both brothers as elder brothers and had treated then both the same. And so this parable far from providing a nice comfortable end leaves us with huge questions to answer, will we join the feast, will we embrace our brother as an equal? This is the radical Jesus, who shows us a new way to be. This story calls us to embrace the oneness that is at the heart of Jesus' message of a love that does not take sides, that offers forgiveness without condition and rejects rejection itself. In the face of injustice, prejudice, intolerance, and anger we are called to love and to reject the easy route of separation, independence and all labels that deny the message we are all made in God's image. We are called to believe we are all children of God and everything that is God is ours. We are partners in creation. That is what the story of the two brothers encourages us to grasp.

Song

There is room at the table (Carrie Newcomer)

Watch [here](#)

Prayers

Loving God, as we worship together we bring you our prayers of concern and commitment. We recognise how easy it is for broken relationships to fuel actions which are less than loving, and we pause to reflect on our own relationships, and where we recognise a need for action may we have the courage to be gracious and generous in our loving.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

As we pray, we remember the people of the Ukraine and Russia, neighbours who have been catapulted into conflict by the actions and intentions of a few people whose motive appears to be power and control. We pray for peace in the world but recognise that often injustice breeds envy which results in conflict. May we work for peace by standing against injustice and living in oneness with our neighbours in their need. Our thoughts are with all those who feel they must leave their country and all those who feel they must stay, in flight or fight may love overcome fear and may we support peace through a loving response to need.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

As we watch the news and hear the stories of injustice and inequality within business, we pray for a government that seeks the well being of all the people and acts for justice and equal opportunities in commerce and industry. We pray especially for all who have lost their employment unexpectedly and pray that the government will uphold the laws which protect employees.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

Loving God we all face many challenges as prices continue to rise in ways we have not seen for a long time, and we see fear growing within families who simply cannot pay for the essentials. May we speak out to encourage good stewardship amongst governments, local and national, to enable better sharing of resources and compassionate care for those in real need.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

Creator God, much of what we are experiencing is reminding us that resources are not infinite, and we need to learn to care more for the planet as we live our daily lives. As we give thanks for the rich diversity of our world may we recognise the many ways in which our way of living is destroying that diversity and threatening the systems which support out life. May we encourage a more sustainable way of living, changing our use of resources to better share with others these valuable commodities at the same time exploring new ways of living in harmony with creation.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

As we continue to live with Covid, our prayers continue for all who suffer from the effects of the virus, those living with long covid and those grieving for loved ones. We give thanks that science continues to discover more about the virus and is enabling us to rebuild life together. May we all continue to take responsibility for the safety of one another by tsking sensible precautions in all that we do.

Gracious God may our words and actions sow love in a world of fear.

May our prayers be a celebration of our oneness, and our lives be a force for peace in the world beginning with our own families and encouraging each other in our way of living lovingly. Amen.

Our offering to God.

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 sharing the message of hope that is God's love. Amen

Suggested hymn Brother, sister let me serve you
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.