

Sunday 22nd October 2023

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, we worship together in God.

Reading Exodus 33:12-23
Matthew 22:15-22

Reflection

We all need a little bit of reassurance in our lives, encouragement that what we are doing is good. At the beginning of most of his letters to the early churches Paul started with words of reassurance. In 1Thessalonians we read 'Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

²We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.'

He did often follow it up with some 'advice' on how to do better but that reassurance was important.

In our passage from Exodus Moses is seeking reassurance from God. Reassurance that God will remain with the people of Israel as they cross into the promised land and he classifies the reassurance with an expectation of distinctiveness. God's people will be different. Now, if you have read the rest of the Old Testament you will know how often the people of Israel strayed and became the same as everyone else. We are also aware of how this understanding of distinctiveness has been misinterpreted throughout the last few centuries, continuing to cause unrest even today. Every human being is special but that does not make us better than others, what makes us special is the gifts we bring to the world, and everyone has gifts, although some people take a little longer to recognise their gifts.

As part of his own reassurance Moses asks to see God 'face to face', a very unusual request in its time as God was mediated through priests. For me there is a bigger question, 'does God have a face'? In our twenty-first century understanding of God many are moving away from the image of God as a being in any form, and certainly not one who replicates our own experience of a body. If God is everywhere and in everything God is not limited by a body and so does not have a face, hands, feet as we know them. Today we 'see' God in so many different ways, in the glory of creation, but also in the situation of every human being. In the wonder of a baby, in the joy of relationships and in the food-bank queue, in a doorway with a newspaper as a blanket, in the old person forced to turn down the heating and find another layer for warmth, in the person overcome by grief and loss and loneliness, in the young person facing invasive treatment for disease. We see God everywhere and we are privileged to serve God through our actions to help others. But it can all be a bit overwhelming and maybe we do need to be sheltered a bit just like Moses.

We need to remember that we have a gift to use, our own gift, and we are not expected to be able to do everything.

Story – Your Special Gift by Max Lucado ([Listen here](#))

When we work together we can do pretty amazing things. When we work together we can be like Jesus and challenge the world when the laws of world create injustice and inequality. It is still dangerous, we know what happened to Jesus, but together we can make a difference. In our reading from Matthew we have another example of the religious authorities trying to trick Jesus but he has an answer. We are reminded of this when we share the Statement of the nature and faith of the URC which we adapted for our own Statement as Newland Church. We are citizens in the world and we should be honest and loving and play our part, however we are also citizens of the Kingdom and we must challenge the law when it is less than loving, for we are the people of the light, people living by love.

There are many who ask if the church is still relevant in today's world and my answer is it can be, but we have to become the church for today and let go of the things that have become irrelevant, our outdated doctrines and creeds for example, and the idea that mission is something we do for people rather than with people. We have to be in a position to challenge the assumptions many have about what church is, and

does. We have to acknowledge how little we really know and understand, but talk about how we can grow in understanding: we have to share our questions so that others feel free to ask their questions without fear of feeling silly. We all have questions, we are all human, we are all on a journey.

We have to bring our special gifts, and help each other recognise our gifts, and then work together to use our gifts to make a difference. We don't have to do the same thing as another church because we are different people with different gifts but we do need to find out how we can use our gifts to create love and light in the world. Gifts are not always practical skills like DIY or baking, being a good listener is a gift, being a carer is a gift, being an ideas person is a gift. What is important is recognising the gifts others have and encouraging them without overpowering them, we are called to welcome, reassure, encourage but above all love one another, friends, neighbours and strangers.