

Worshipping Together : Apart  
Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021 at 10.30am  
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United  
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

*A Call to Worship God*

I have chosen the way of faithfulness;  
I have set my heart on your laws.  
I hold fast to your statutes, Lord;  
I run the path of your commands  
for you have set my heart free.

*(Psalm 119: 30 – 32 (TNIV))*

*Hymn – R&S 277: MP 251:*

*John Newton. (1725-1807)*

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear:  
it soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds, and drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast;  
'tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary, rest.

Dear Name! the rock on which I build, my shield and hiding place,  
my never-failing treasury, filled with boundless stores of grace:

Jesus! my Shepherd, and my Friend, my Prophet, Priest and King,  
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought;  
but when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.

Till then I would thy love proclaim with every fleeting breath;  
and may the music of thy Name refresh my soul in death.

## Approaching God in Prayer

Lord God, it's good to take time out of my busyness to worship you,  
to turn my heart and mind to you,  
to remind myself of your eternal words of life and love.

It is your faith in me that nourishes me,  
because sometimes my faith is weak.

It is your prayers for me that sustain me, not my prayers,  
because I can be slow to pray.

It is your abiding in me that gives me eternal life,  
not my abiding in you, because I can be inconsistent.

Lord it is you I come to today;  
receive me; help me; forgive me; make me whole.

Lord God, you are not just generous, but extravagant  
and we cannot put a price on the abundant gifts we receive from you,  
the gifts of love, faith, joy, truth and hope.  
Their value cannot be measured in money,  
they are what makes life worth living  
and I thank you for them.

And whilst these gifts are not for sale, nor for trading,  
they are for sharing;  
so with the inspiration and courage of the Holy Spirit,  
increase their value for your kingdom work.

But there are times when I have walked away from your kingdom work  
Lord God, from church, from you even from myself:  
Times when I was upset, disappointed, angry;  
because it seemed you were absent and didn't care;

when it seemed that my cries, and the cries of the world,  
were unheard and unanswered.

Forgive me for the times I've let you down.

Help me always to be honest, even if I can't always be faithful.

Though I fail to turn to you many a time,

I am grateful that I can bring everything to you in prayer.

I know that you put your ear to my heart and listen for me there,  
even when I am silent.

But I say out loud now the prayer Jesus taught me...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever.

Amen

### *Introducing Today's Gospel reading.*

You're going to read from John's Gospel again – and again you'll start  
by reading the last two verses you read last week – we are in mid  
conversation!

Look out for how Jesus' words disturb and 'discombobulate' a large  
number of his followers – and Peter's response.

### *Gospel Reading: John 6: 56 – 69*

<sup>56</sup> Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in  
them. <sup>57</sup> Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the  
Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. <sup>58</sup> This is the bread

that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.’ <sup>59</sup> He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

<sup>60</sup> When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ <sup>61</sup> But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, ‘Does this offend you?’ <sup>62</sup> Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? <sup>63</sup> It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. <sup>64</sup> But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. <sup>65</sup> And he said, ‘For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.’

<sup>66</sup> Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. <sup>67</sup> So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ <sup>68</sup> Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. <sup>69</sup> We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’<sup>[a]</sup>

*Hymn – MP 790: Mavis Ford © 1978 Authentic Publishing CCLI Song No. 114452*

You are the King of glory, You are the Prince of peace,  
You are the Lord of heaven and earth,  
You’re the Son of righteousness.  
Angels bow down before You, worship and adore,  
for You have the words of eternal life, You are Jesus Christ the Lord

*Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna to the King of Kings!  
Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
for Jesus the Messiah reigns!*

## Reflections – Part 1 – Real Life!

In Church we often use everyday things to use as symbols to help us understand God's presence and activity in our midst... just like Jesus did in his parables.

Symbols somehow act as a prism through which one ray of light shines, but through which a multiplicity of rays emerge... one thing through which many insights are revealed and through which one might see amazing ideas and possibilities.

And Simon Peter saw right through Jesus to the possibility of real life the possibility that lay beyond him.

Jesus had focussed those twelve disciples' attention; Jesus is the one with the words of eternal life.

Jesus was dusty from the road, weary from the journey and quite conscious of the disciples' frequent lack of faith.

But Simon Peter saw right through Jesus into all that was possible because of him and through him, he saw the possibilities that Jesus opened up for his followers. Jesus was - and is - like a symbol that brings into focus more than can be put into words, more than can be expressed through words and more than can be captured in a picture.

Simon Peter saw the *promise* of Jesus unfolding along a journey *with* Jesus.

Simon Peter saw right through Jesus. Through him he saw the life-giving healings and life-giving teachings. He'd even participated in the life-giving feedings.

Jesus focussed Simon Peter's attention and directed him to the heart of reality, to the secret of life itself. Jesus' words were Spirit and Life.

'There's real life for you!' said Simon Peter.

And we often use the power of symbols, like the cross and bread and wine. We see the object, but sense more because of the meaning of them, we see what is symbolised by them.

We can meet Jesus, but see life-giving healings, life-transforming teachings, and life-supporting feedings. We can hear Jesus' words and be confronted with the possibility and promise of eternal life.

To who else would we go? Jesus has the words of eternal life.

In Jesus we see more than a man, we see God incarnate – God in person and all the promise of a thousand adventures, as yet unexperienced, and a myriad of encounters as yet unknown, on a road unexplored but travelled with Jesus as our companion.

So, smell the open road and anticipate the journey.

There you are! There's real life for you!

## Prayer

Lord of adventure; Word of life; Spirit of change,  
from amongst all that grabs our attention,  
all the clanging, clamour and clutter of life,  
show me your grace through signs of transcendence.  
Show me your activity among us and throughout all creation.

Enable me to focus beyond the obvious to see you embracing us with a twinkle of love in your eyes, and a smile of recognition on your face - calling me on with your words of eternal life.

In you I have discovered real life  
and I travel the road of life with you.

Forgive me for the times when I've overlooked you in the every day  
and the common, in others  
and in myself.

Quicken my mind to recognise you and respond to you.

Because you Lord have the words of eternal life.

Who else could I go to?

So Lord, teach me, inspire me and enable me  
through Jesus Christ our Lord                      Amen

*Hymn - R&S - 538:*

*George Herbert (1593-1633) altd.*

Teach me, my God and King, in all things thee to see,  
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.

## *Reflections - Part 2 - Who is on the Lord's Side*

Who is on the Lord's side?

It's easy to be part of a popular, successful movement.

But real loyalty is shown when a cause becomes unfashionable and unpopular. Not everyone sticks with a football team when they crash out of the Premier League?

John reflects on just such a decline - from the delighted crowds, filled with bread and fish, to the dwindling group he describes here.

John's favourite word for loyalty is 'abide'. This loyalty is a reciprocal act of indwelling or 'making a home with'. It's also used to describe the way the branch of a vine is rooted for life in the trunk. So, Jesus is saying that to turn away from him is death, just as a branch withers when it's separated from its life source. To be with Jesus is to be intertwined with his life, to be detached is to have no life at all.

Yet when many of his disciples do turn away from him as a result of his difficult teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, Jesus seems resigned to their defection and makes no apparent effort to sweet-talk them into staying with him. It's a choice they - and we - make. In fact, he intensifies the offence they feel with a fairly direct reference to his crucifixion, a taboo subject in that society.

Everyone has been invited to participate in this bread sharing community! And, to share in the life of Jesus, everyone has been invited! But not everyone is willing to do so, because the teaching is challenging, life will have to be different as a result of accepting Jesus as a lived experience. To abide with Jesus presents a 'crisis' point, a moment of decision.

Sometimes it seems easy to be drawn to Jesus - and sometimes it's hard to 'abide' in him and it seems like an easier thing to turn away.

Truly following Jesus as a disciple is not *just* a choice for us to weigh up, nor one option among others, but a life-changing moment of revelation, from which there is no way back. Jesus is the embodiment

of that revelation, not a salesman trying to persuade a reluctant customer to buy his product.

Jesus puts the remaining twelve disciples on the spot by giving them permission to leave. But, Simon Peter has a penny-dropping moment of revelation, a GBO - a glimpse of the blindingly obvious: where else can they go now that they have already met the Messiah, the Saviour? Simon Peter has a moment of 'epiphany'.

So, from that larger crowd of disciples, twelve remain with Jesus and their commitment is summed up in Simon Peter's response to Jesus' question: 'Lord, to whom can we go?'

Peter realises that, having spent time with Jesus, it's only Jesus who has the words that make sense of this life and open the way to eternal life. Jesus is able to teach the disciples how to live a full life, a life full of purpose and meaning which is touched *by* and filled *with* God's love.

Still speaking for the other disciples, Peter adds that Jesus is also the revelation of God's holiness, the man from heaven who brings that other-worldly reality vividly to life, here and now.

In Jesus, the disciples experience an unbroken connection between heaven and earth, which has changed everything for them. This is the gift of the Spirit, whose power creates the possibility of this renewed life.

Peter is the one who declares Jesus' true identity in the other Gospels, but John spells out for us the implications of this claim in far more detail.

The Christian community has a dynamic of coming in and going out.

We are called to abide in Christ. And despite the difficulties and mysteries of faith, we too can echo Peter's words affirming Jesus' identity as the holy one of God.

But like the disciples and Jesus himself, the Church is also called to go out to where the crowds are, where there is hunger for literal and metaphorical bread, to where people need nourishment for their bodies, or their spirits - or both.

In our churches we sometimes face difficult and divisive issues. There are times when it would be easy to walk away, when the teaching or the direction of travel is too difficult for us.

We are all different and we will stand firm over different issues. Simon Peter, in the face of the whole, difficult truth, accepts and wants to abide.

And even though there may be better offers open to us, we keep worshipping, because Jesus has the words of eternal life - and we are drawn to God by them.

Amen

## Prayer

Gracious God, you are both comforting and unsettling.

You challenge me to be faithful in following your Son, even when everything in me wants to walk away.

Thank you for holding on to me

when I am unable to hold on to you,

and for giving us one another for support and encouragement.

Thank you for understanding my frailty

and for nourishing me with your words of life Amen.

## Holding the World in Prayer

Now pray for the predicament of the world and those people God has given to you to love and care for

In prayer I bring before you, Lord,  
all those who need to hear your words of eternal life;  
all those who endure losses and endings;  
all those who hear only the sounds of war;  
only words of criticism; only their own voice  
Loving God speak your words of eternal life  
and help me to hear you well.

I pray for all those people in places of conflict and those fleeing conflict  
people at the mercy of other people's battles and power struggles  
those depending on other people's generosity  
and living in hope of a better way... especially for the people of  
Afghanistan.....

In quiet trust I remember those who you have given to me, Lord, for  
my love and care.....  
those situations around the world that have caught my attention and  
made me weep.....  
and those who have asked me to pray for them.....

Lord, speak your words of hope and peace, your words of eternal life  
and loyalty through which you abide in me and I abide in you, forever.  
Lord hear my prayers - spoken and unspoken in Jesus precious name.  
Amen

## Hymn - R&S 489: MP 51

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,  
naught be all else to me, save that thou art —  
thou my best thought in the day and the night,  
waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,  
thou ever with me and I with thee, Lord;  
thou my great Father, thy child let me be,  
thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;  
be thou my dignity, thou my delight,  
thou my soul's shelter, and thou my strong tower;  
raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise,  
thou mine inheritance, now and always;  
thou and thou only, the first in my heart,  
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun,  
grant me its joys after vict'ry is won;  
heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

*Ancient Irish poem tr. Mary E. Byrne (1880-1931) and Eleanor H. Hull (1860-1935) altd.*

## Closing Words and Blessing

Jesus calls me his follower.

Open my ears to your word of life; Open my mouth to feast on you;  
Open my heart to live for you; For you are my Lord and my God  
Creator, nourisher and sustainer.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,  
be with us all evermore. Amen

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