

Worshipping God Together : Apart
Sunday 23rd January 2022 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

A Call to Worship God

Jesus stands with you, so greet him with faith.

The wind of the Spirit blows sure and strong, so look forward with hope.

The world calls with its needs and fears, so look outward in love.

The Church gathers before God, as is our custom and joy.

The scripture is open before me and all the Church, with a word of life.

The Spirit beckons us, to speak and to share good news,
so that, to the painful and narrow places of the world,
freedom will come.

Where hearts lose sight of God's purpose, new horizons will open.

When times are hard, and the years weigh heavy, God's day will dawn.

In the name of the Anointed One, Jesus;

by the power of the Holy Spirit;

to the glory of God Amen. Amen. Amen!

Hymn – R&S 114: (Tune: Luckington)

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Let all the world in every corner sing

'My God and King!'

The heavens are not too high, his praise may thither fly:

the earth is not too low, his praises there may grow.

Let all the world in every corner sing

'My God and King!'

The Church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out:

but, above all, the heart must bear the longest part.

Let all the world in every corner sing

'My God and King!'

Approaching God in Prayer

God of wisdom I offer you the attention of my heart and mind,
so that I may understand more about living,
about my neighbour and about you.

God of majesty, I offer you the worship of my church and of my heart,
so that apart and yet together, we may praise and honour you
with the awe and reverence you deserve.

Lord God, stranger and friend,
I offer you the fullness of my feelings and emotions,
my faith and my joys, my fears and my weeping,
so that I may discover you beside me
on the mountain-tops *and* in the valleys of my years.

So, speak to me, in the written word of scripture,
with the inner voice of faith,
in the name of the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ,
so that I may love you with heart, soul, mind and strength
as your law commands.

But, with all your Church, I come before you acknowledging that
sometimes my faith is fragile and poor
plagued by doubt and hanging by a thread.
Lord God, faithful and sure, increase my trust
and open my life to your presence.

When my affections are faltering,
and my love for others is tested to the limit,
Lord God, faithful and sure, dwell in my heart and root me in love.

When my actions are fickle and my attempts to live justly are half-hearted,
Lord God, faithful and sure, open my heart to the true demands of faith.

Lord God, you had faith in humankind long before we had faith in you,
so, help us to grow in faithfulness, daring to give ourselves
and to dance in the joy of your presence here on earth, just as in heaven.

So I come before you with words I learned from you and all those who, through the years have given the words meaning
Our Father, who art in heaven....

Bible Reading: Nehemiah 8: 1 – 10

¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁴ Ezra the teacher of the Law stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion. Beside him on his right stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah and Maaseiah; and on his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malkijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah and Meshullam.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

⁷ The Levites – Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan and Pelaiah – instructed the people in the Law while the people were standing there.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, 'This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep.' For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, 'Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.'

Setting the Scene

What a lot of tricky names there were in that Old Testament reading!

The Levites Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah are mentioned by name because they were vitally important – they all helped the people gathered in the town square to understand what was being read to them from the Book of the Law of Moses (which is some of what we call the Old Testament of the Bible). Verse 8 says – 'They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning, so that the people understood what was being read'.

That got me thinking about some of the people who have given me the meaning and helped me to understand the things we read and hear from the Bible.

There were my Junior Church leaders Betsy Harrison and a lovely gentleman called 'Johnny' – his real name was Theodore Francis Johnson but everyone called him 'Johnny' (and some called him 'Spike'). There was Frank Nunn, my Minister when I was growing up in Church. Then there was Beryl, a family friend and Donald Elliot my Minister when I was a Student in Leicester and my own mum and dad who helped me to understand the meaning of the Bible by interpreting or explaining it.

So, I wonder who you'll remember when you take a moment to think of people who've helped you to understand the Bible, who will and do you remember because they gave you, or still give meaning to the words, so that you can understand you read – or what's being read.

Keep a time of quiet to remember....

Now, in both Nehemiah's time and Jesus' time, the Bible - or Scriptures - were written on special parchment paper that rolled into a scroll.

Perhaps you'll find a piece of paper and some wool or ribbon or string and write on the paper, the names of anyone you can think of who's helped you to understand more about God (perhaps a minister or a Junior Church Leader or a family member – you choose)

Then roll the paper up and tie it with the wool / string/ribbon, so that it's a bit like a scroll. And the name of your special person, or people will be written down, because they are just as important as Jeshua, Bani, and all of those folks with names that are difficult to pronounce, people whose names were written down more than 2,500 years ago, people we can read about now because they helped people understand more about God, just like Betsy and Johnny and Beryl and Frank and Donald did for me and all those people who help you.

Gospel Reading: Luke 4: 14 – 21 **Jesus is rejected at Nazareth**

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down.

The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

Hymn – R&S 637:

John Bell (1949-) and Graham Maule (1958-)

The Day of the Lord shall come, as prophets have told,
when Christ shall make all things new, no matter how old.
And some at the stars may gaze, and some at God's word,
in vain to predict the time, the Day of the Lord.

*The desert shall spring to life, the hills shall rejoice;
the lame of the earth shall leap, the dumb shall find voice;
the lamb with the lion shall lie, and the last shall be first;
and nations for war no more shall study or thirst.*

The Day of the Lord shall come — a thief in the night,
a curse to those in the wrong who think themselves right,
a pleasure for those in pain or with death at the door;
a true liberation for the prisoners and poor.

The Day of the Lord shall come and judgement be known,
as nations like sheep and goats come close to the throne.
Then Christ shall himself reveal, asking all to draw near
and see in his face all faces once ignored here.

The Day of the Lord shall come, but now is the time
to subvert earth's wisdom with Christ's folly sublime,
by loving the loveless, turning the tide and the cheek,
by walking beneath the cross in step with the weak.

Reflections

I always have a 'To do list', 'ticking' things off it makes me feel that I've achieved something, and it's also a good record of what I've 'done', if I ever need to account for it.

I never seem to have less than 9 *work* things on my 'To do list', no matter how much I do! And Jesus had a 'To do list', but he only had five things on his list! But what a list!

To proclaim good news to the poor

To proclaim freedom for the prisoners

To proclaim recovery of sight for the blind

To set the oppressed free

And, last, but not least - To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Wow! Where would you start with that list?!

But this is Jesus' 'To do list'. These five items are what Jesus' whole ministry was about.

And our 'To do lists' and 'agendas' pale into insignificance by comparison.

Think for a moment about Jesus' 'office' so to speak – this 'to do list' is announced in the Synagogue, right in the bosom of Judaism, where he would have attended and participated regularly, as all *male* adults were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and commenting on it, Jesus speaks from *within* the religious system.

Whilst there was only one Temple, located in Jerusalem there were many Synagogues, run by lay people, the Pharisees being the most prominent among them. Wherever ten adult men wished to 'constitute' themselves, a Synagogue could arise.

The Synagogue wasn't only an assembly for worship, it was also a school, a community centre and a place for administering justice.

In this Nazareth synagogue, Jesus was among relatives and friends.

The people there would have been familiar with the text Jesus read from Isaiah, the *set* text for that day - Isaiah 61 specifically. It's one of what we call 'the Servant Songs' and the term 'anointed me' means "made me the Christ, or the Messiah".

So, this account of a moment in Jesus' life includes a proclamation, it's significant because it announces not only what he will 'do' but also who he is, the *Christ*, the *Messiah*, and what will power him - God's Spirit.

Translated literally (by those who know how to!) the words Jesus read from Isaiah go like this 'The Christ is God's servant who will bring to reality the longing and the hope of the poor, the oppressed and the imprisoned. The Christ will also usher in the amnesty, the liberation and the restoration associated with the proclamation of the year of 'jubilee' (*Leviticus 25: 10a* 'you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants'.)

So, to roll up the scripture and proclaim that ‘today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing’ was a bold and daring move on Jesus’ part, to present yourself as the Christ. the Messiah was a massive claim to make!

And not only that, he states that today this scripture is *fulfilled* - today! The age of God’s reign is here – now!

‘Today’ is when God’s promises are fulfilled and God’s purpose comes to fruition, the day has arrived. Today there will be changes for those who have waited and hoped. Those changes for the poor and the wronged and the oppressed will occur today.

It’s gone on too long - the time of God is today. And the ministries of both Jesus and the Church, according to the accounts in Luke’s Gospel and the Book of Acts (written by the same author) demonstrate that ‘today’ was intended to continue.

Throughout Luke and Acts, ‘*today*’ is never allowed to become ‘*yesterday*’, some time in the past, nor is it allowed to slip into a vague ‘*someday*’.

In the five items on Jesus’ ‘To do list’, Jesus is setting out the scope and scale of his ministry. He will be challenging and changing things - make no mistake, in favour of the poor, the blind, the prisoners and the oppressed by his actions and his attitude.

Anyway, skipping to the end of Luke’s Gospel for a moment (*chapter 24: 44 – 49*), Luke tells us that “*Jesus said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

Then he opened the disciples’ minds, so that they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

So, if this was Jesus' 'To do list', his agenda then it is ours too! We are disciples and witnesses, clothed with power. So, I wonder in what ways does our 'To do list' mirror Jesus' 'To do list'? Do our agendas reflect Jesus' agenda? Jesus' agenda *must* be the Church's agenda.

Soon you will 'sing' "Just as the Father sent me, I'm sending you out to be my witness throughout the world, the whole of the world. He sent me to give the good news to the poor" - and so on.

We can look back to times when oppressed people were liberated, and thank God for those people who followed Christ's agenda to achieve that. All those who played their part in the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement in America and the end of Apartheid in South Africa, to name just three. But it's today that we have Jesus' agenda to fulfil. We can't let yesterday be our field of activity, it's today when Jesus' and therefore our 'To do list' must be worked on.

Take a look at these song lyrics - you may recognise them...

I wish I knew how to be free – Nina Simone – recorded in 1967

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me
I wish I could say all the things that I should say,
say 'em loud say 'em clear for the whole round world to hear.

I wish I could share all the love that's in my heart
remove all the bars that keep us apart
I wish you could know what it means to be me
then you'd see and agree that every man should be free.

I wish I could give all I'm longin' to give
I wish I could live like I'm longing to live
I wish I could do all the things that I can do
and though I'm way overdue, I'd be startin' a new.

Well I wish I could be like a bird in the sky
how sweet it would be if I found I could fly
oh I'd soar to the sun and look down at the sea.

Then I'd sing 'cause I'd know yeah
and I'd sing 'cause I'd know yeah
and I'd sing 'cause I'd know I'd know how it feels
I'd know how it feels to be free.
Yeah, yeah I'd know how it feels
Yes, I'd know I'd know how it feels, how it feels
to be free, oh Lord.

Songwriters: William Taylor; Richard Carroll Lamb

This song was written in 1963 when black and white people were segregated in America. It's a gospel / jazz song, a song from the heart of someone oppressed and captive, unheard because of the colour of her skin, someone with so much to say and share, the sort of person Jesus would have liberated in order that she could challenge a prejudiced society of which you were in, or out.

So, who are the oppressed today? Who has something to say and share but can't because of the attitude of the world? Who in our communities feel trapped *today* and long to be free? I leave that with you to ponder!

We must not let 'our' day be yesterday. We are to reach out, beyond our comfort zones today!

So, how will we, as the Church and individually bear testimony 'today' to Jesus announcement and his gracious five-point proclamation, which is for the whole world 'today'
to proclaim *good news* to the *poor*
to proclaim *freedom* for the *prisoners*
to proclaim *recovery of sight* for the *blind*
to set the *oppressed free*
and to *proclaim* the year of the Lord's *favour*. Amen

Hymn – R&S 576:

*Hubert J. Richards (1921-)**

God's spirit is deep in my heart; he has called me and set me apart;
and this is what I have to do – what I have to do:

*He sent me to give the good news to the poor,
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,
tell blind people that they can see,*

*and set the down trodden free,
and go tell ev'ryone the news
that the kingdom of God has come;
and go tell ev'ryone the news that God's kingdom has come.*

And just as the Father sent me, so I'm sending you out to be my witness through out the world – the whole of the world:

Don't carry a load in your pack; you don't need two shirts on your back; a workman can earn his own keep – can earn his own keep:

Don't worry what you have to say; don't worry, because on that day God's spirit will speak in your heart will – speak in your heart:

Holdiᅡg the World in Prayer

Come near Lord God and listen for the prayers of my heart as I offer you my prayers for the world in which I live...

...for the poor;

those living in refugee camps, slums and boxes on the edges of big cities – and those that are spiritually poor, because they do not know you.

Lord, guide us and show us how to bring good news to the poor, both physically and spiritually.

...for those held prisoner;

especially those held unjustly, perhaps as hostages, and those held prisoner by addictions and habits.

Lord, guide us and show us how to bring release to prisoners, both physically and spiritually.

... for the blind; for those who physically cannot see, and those who cannot see the love that is around them.

Lord, guide and show us how to bring sight to the blind both physically and spiritually.

...for the oppressed:

for those who are not well, particularly suffering from mental illnesses: for the depressed, anxious, fearful and paranoid.

Lord, guide and show us how to release the oppressed,
both physically and spiritually.

Finally, I pray for myself and our churches.

Show us how we can proclaim the year of the Lord's favour - his grace, his
undeserved and unearned love - today
and bring good news to all those around us, friend and stranger. Amen.

Hymn – R&S 285: MP 496

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

O for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
the glories of my God and King, the triumphs of his grace.

Jesus, the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'tis life and health and peace.

He breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free;
his blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me.

He speaks, and listening to his voice new life the dead receive;
the mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.

Hear him, ye deaf; his praise, ye dumb, your loosened tongues employ;
ye blind, behold your Saviour come; and leap, ye lame, for joy!

My gracious Master and my God, assist me to proclaim,
to spread through all the earth abroad the honours of thy name.

Sending Words and Blessing

With the law of the Lord to guide us and the joy of the Lord as our strength
may the Spirit of God anoint us for service to the poor,
the oppressed and the captive, both here and in the whole round world.

Equip us to proclaim loud and clear God's Good News
and God's blessing in Jesus Name. Amen

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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