

Worshipping God Together : Apart
Sunday 27th March 2022 at 10.30am
Church; Physically Distanced but Spiritually United
Worship Prepared by Rev. Janine Atkinson

Reflections for the Third Sunday in Lent and Mothering Sunday

A Call to Worship God

Hosea said that God is like a mother with her children.
Despite Israel's disobedience, God said,
'When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms
but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human
kindness, with bands of love, I was to them like those who lift infants to
their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.' (*Hosea 11. 1 - 4*)
So, nurturing, mothering God, I come to worship
and thank you for all that you have done in my life.

Hymn – R&S 72: MP 486: *Martin Rinkart. (1586-1649) tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827-78)*

Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices;
who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mother's arms has blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
with ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God the Father now be given,
the Son, and him who reigns with them in highest heaven,
the one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now, and shall be ever more.

Approaching God in Prayer

Nurturing God,
thank you for the ways in which you care for each one of us.
Like the best parent, you love us –
whoever we are and whatever we do.
Even though we must sometimes disappoint you,
you are always there, concerned for us, loving us, forgiving us.

Nurturing God, I thank you
and I ask you to forgive me for the times I take you for granted,
when I do things and sometimes live life in a way that hurts others,
even those closest people - members of my family and my friends.
Nurturing God, forgive me.

Forgive me for running away like a child from your difficult ways,
for getting so involved in the activities,
pleasures and concerns of life
that I forget that you are there for me.
Nurturing God, forgive me. Bring me home again to you.

Now pray for the people who have made life better... leave a silence after each line as you remember particular people

Loving God, I give thanks for all those who care for me...
those who have encouraged me and helped us to grow...
those who have forgiven me...
those who have cared for me when I have been unwell...
those who have supported me when times were hard...
those who have challenged me...
those who have told me about you.
Nurturing God, I give you thanks. Amen.

Nurturing God, I thank you as I say the prayer Jesus taught us:-

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.

Setting the Scene

From beginning to end, Creation to Revelation, the Bible is a gradually unfolding love story. Its pages are peppered with clues that gradually help us to build up a picture of the extent of God's love for us.

Love is a common and beautiful thread that's woven through the Bible's pages. Without love, the fabric of the Gospel - the Good News about God - would unravel.

So, we have a Gospel of love to proclaim, the good news that despite how much, or how little love we experience in life, each and every one of us is the subject of God's eternal love story. Each and every one of us is the object of God's love and the apple of God's eye.

And so, through people like you and me, God's love story continues to unfold and extend beyond the pages of the Bible to the furthest reaches and deepest depths of our predicament today. Because, no matter what happens in life, because life does '*happen*' in unexpected and unhelpful ways, there's one thing God can't do, God can't ever stop loving you – no matter what

Here are some familiar words from John's Gospel (3: 16) 'Listen' for God's word of love – for you

"For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved *through* him".

And some words believed to be by the same author from The First Letter of John Chapter 4 verses 10 and 11

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought also to love one another"

Now read about the unconditional love of a Father. It's a story you might be familiar with. In this story, perhaps the Father represents God and teaches us about God's great and no-strings-attached love. So 'listen' for God as you read.

Bible Reading: Luke 15: 1 – 3; 11b – 32 (Easy-to-read Version)

¹ Many tax collectors and sinners came to listen to Jesus. ² Then the Pharisees and the teachers of the law began to complain, "Look, this man welcomes sinners and even eats with them!"

³ Then Jesus told them this story...

"There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger son said to his father, 'Give me now the part of your property that I am supposed to receive someday.' So, the father divided his wealth between his two sons. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered up all that he had and left. He travelled far away to another country, and there he wasted his money living like a fool. ¹⁴ After he spent everything he had, there was a terrible famine throughout the country. He was hungry and needed money. ¹⁵ So he went and got a job with one of the people who lived there. The man sent him into the fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He was so hungry that he wanted to eat the food the pigs were eating. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “The son realized that he had been very foolish. He thought, ‘All my father’s hired workers have plenty of food. But here I am, almost dead because I have nothing to eat. ¹⁸ I will leave and go to my father. I will say to him: Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But let me be like one of your hired workers.’

²⁰ So he left and went to his father.

“While the son was still a long way off, his father saw him coming and felt sorry for him. So, he ran to him and hugged and kissed him.

²¹ The son said,

‘Father, I have sinned against God and have done wrong to you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Hurry! Bring the best clothes and put them on him.

Also, put a ring on his finger and good sandals on his feet. ²³ And bring our best calf and kill it so that we can celebrate with plenty to eat. ²⁴ My son was dead, but now he is alive again! He was lost, but now he is found!’ So they began to have a party.

²⁵ “The older son had been out in the field. When he came near the house, he heard the sound of music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called to one of the servant boys and asked, ‘What does all this mean?’ ²⁷ The boy said, ‘Your brother has come back, and your father killed the best calf to eat. He is happy because he has his son back safe and sound.’

²⁸ “The older son was angry and would not go in to the party. So, his father went out and begged him to come in. ²⁹ But he said to his father, ‘Look, for all these years I have worked like a slave for you. I have always done what you told me to do, and you never gave me even a young goat’



for a party with my friends. ³⁰ But then this son of yours comes home after wasting your money on prostitutes, and you kill the best calf for him!'

³¹ "His father said to him, 'Oh, my son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² But this was a day to be happy and celebrate. Your brother was dead, but now he is alive. He was lost, but now he is found.'"

Hymn – R&S 41: MP 152

For the beauty of the earth, for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth over and around us lies:

Gracious God, to thee we raise this our sacrifice of praise.

For the beauty of each hour of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower, sun and moon, and stars of light:

Refrain...

For the joy of ear and eye, for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony linking sense to sound and sight:

Refrain...

For the joy of human love, brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above; for all gentle thoughts and mild:

Refrain...

For each perfect gift of thine to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine, flowers of earth and buds of heaven:

Refrain...

For thy people, evermore lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore their pure sacrifice of love:

Refrain...

Folliot S. Pierpoint. (1835-1917)

Reflections

When I was younger, I thought the word 'Prodigal' meant 'forgiven', because I thought the key thing about this story was that, no matter what the son had done, he could return to his Father, and be forgiven.

Now, of course, I realise that the word means wasteful and reckless. Perhaps we would understand the language more easily if it was called ‘The Reckless Son’ rather than ‘The Prodigal Son’. But then again, it could equally appropriately be called ‘The Forgiving Father’, because, at its heart, this is a story about the unconditional love of a Father who, despite the reckless and unreasonable behaviour of his younger son, is prepared to welcome him back with open arms. You might say that the Father is wastefully extravagant and reckless with his love, much to the annoyance of the older son. In fact, because the Father is so extravagant with his welcoming love, we could call it ‘The Prodigal Father’

‘It’s not fair’ is one of the stock phrases children use as they learn about life and the skills and tools they will need to survive in a world that neither recognises, demonstrates nor agrees with their personal views of justice.

As adults, are we much different? This story tests our motivation for judging what’s fair and just. The Father wants to share everything with his older son and does so, every day – ‘what’s mine is yours’ he says. The older brother thinks that his Father’s extravagance and generosity to his younger brother is unfair and diminishes *him*. Yet the Father’s generosity to the younger son does not diminish in any way his sharing of everything with his older son during the intervening time.

Yet the older son hates to see his Father being generous to his reckless brother.

I think we all like to picture ourselves as the reckless younger son, we want to receive that sort of welcome, so we identify with him.

But sometimes we will be inclined to feel for the plight of the older brother and identify with him – always there, constant, faithful and loyal, yet receiving no special treatment, despite our faithful obedience and loyalty. It just doesn’t seem fair!

I wonder if sometimes our ideas of fairness and justice are ‘out of kilter’ with God’s ways, both personally and globally.

Perhaps we need to learn to rejoice at what benefits others and to be happy for them without imagining that someone else's gain is always our loss.

The Prodigal Son is another story about lost things – like the lost sheep and the lost coin parables which sit between verses 3 and 11 of Luke chapter 15. All these stories are in response to those particular po-faced Pharisees who didn't like the company Jesus kept.

Again and again, we need to grasp that God's joy at the repentance of a lost one, a 'sinner', enriches the whole kingdom without diminishing our faithful role within it at all, we are each the recipients of all God's love all the time, both the loyal and the lost, the long servers and believers – and those new to faith.

God's story – from beginning to end and into eternity – is a story of unconditional love 'no matter what'!

Hymn – R&S 95: MP 187:

God is love: let heaven adore him; God is love: let earth rejoice;
let creation sing before him, and exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation, he who spread the heavens above,
he who breathes through all creation, he is love, eternal love.

God is love, and is enfolding all the world in one embrace;
his unfailing grasp is holding every child of every race;
and when human hearts are breaking under sorrow's iron rod,
that same sorrow, that same aching wrings with pain the heart of God.

God is love: and though with blindness sin afflicts and clouds the will,
God's eternal loving-kindness holds us fast and guides us still.
Sin and death and hell shall never o'er us final triumph gain;
God is love, so Love for ever o'er the universe must reign.

*Timothy Rees (1874-1939)**

Holding the World in Prayer

Creator God,
you gave us an example of unconditional love,
we give thanks for those who have shown us a glimpse of your love
through their love.
those who have sat by quietly and supportively
those who let us make our own mistakes
but are willing to be there for us, to forgive and love us regardless.

Loving God,
we pray for those who find Mothering Sunday a difficult day,
those who've had difficult experiences of their mother, or father,
or those whose family life is full of conflict, brokenness, bitterness
and recrimination,
assure them that your love is different, and can bring about your peace.

Life-giving God
We pray for new mothers overwhelmed by the demands of small babies,
those lacking sleep, or suffering from post-natal depression.
We pray for parents whose children are very ill,
those who spend their days sitting by a bedside,
waiting for signs of hope.
We pray for parents who have lost children, and whose grief is still raw,
especially on days like today
and for parents estranged from their children, those who don't know
where their children are, or what's become of them.

Empathetic God,
we pray for those who find Mothering Sunday difficult
because they are unable to have much-wanted children.
We pray for all who struggle to bring up children alone
and also for those who grieve the loss of their mother or father.

Self-giving God,
you whose Son died on a cross,
enable all those who need you to be reassured of your love

so great that you were prepared to send your only Son to tell us about it and show us just how great your love and grace are in the hardest way possible.

Caring God,

we pray for those throughout the world who live in conditions much like those experienced by the Prodigal Son once he'd lost his money, those countless people, full of human potential and love scratching a living and dehumanized by poverty.

Lord God,

our world is fractured and needs your mothering and fathering.

We cannot forget the people of Ukraine whose experience tears us apart. So we lift them before you in prayer, knowing that your heart breaks, as ours do, for mothers, fathers and children, the oldest and the youngest whose daily life is our worst nightmare.

But we pray also for a radical change of heart in Russian politicians and for your peace to fill and motivate the Russian people.

We also pray for Russian people who feel broken hearted, ashamed and hopeless for the future.

Lord give a voice to the Russian Church.

We pray that it will become a searching light of, and for, truth and goodness in this time.

And we pray for the security of those who witness to this truth and face persecution.

Lord God, Heavenly King, we pray for your people in Ukraine and Russia and for those in neighbouring countries responding to the needs of countless people searching for safety and refuge.

We pray also for our own politicians

that their hearts will be motivated by the plight of all refugees – mothers and fathers, like us, who are doing everything they possibly can, at great cost, to ensure their own children's safety.

Nourishing God,
remind us of your ways and show us how to care with your Kingdom values instead of the world's values and self-interests,
help us to work for a just and fair sharing of the earth's rich resources which you ensure are enough for everyone's needs.

Enable us to live in the world as signs of your great love for the world.
Amen.

This hymn is based on Mary's words, a mother's words, after she found out she was expecting to bring God to life in the form of Jesus.

Hymn – R&S 740: MP 631:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!
Unnumbered blessings give my spirit voice;
tender to me the promise of his word;
in God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!
Make known His might, the deeds his arm has done;
his mercy sure, from age to age the same;
his holy name — the Lord, the mighty One.

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!
Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
the hungry fed, the humble lifted high.

Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!
Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
to children's children and forever more!

Timothy Dudley-Smith. (1926-) based on Luke 1:46-55

Closing Words and Blessing

How many times have I wanted to put my arms around all your people,
just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let
me. (*Luke 13:34*)

Under your wings You would hide us, mothering God
Under your wings You would shelter us, mothering God
Under your wings You would warm us, mothering God
Under your wings You would nurture us, mothering God.

(Ruth Burgess from Eggs and Ashes p.66)

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

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