

Worship – 23rd August 2020

Welcome to worship

Welcome to our worship this Sunday 23 August. Ruth will be leading the prayers and Clare Pickering is the preacher for today. We begin our worship as we sing -

Hymn: I will worship (CMP 991)

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| 1. I will worship (I will worship)
With all of my heart (With all of my heart)
I will praise You (I will praise you)
With all of my strength (all my strength)
I will seek You (I will seek You)
All of my days (all of my days)
I will follow (I will follow)
All of Your ways (all Your ways) | 2. I will bow down (I will bow down)
Hail You as King (hail You as King)
I will serve You (I will serve You)
Give you everything (give You everything)
I will lift up (I will lift up)
My eyes to Your throne (my eyes to Your
throne)
I will trust You (I will trust You)
I will trust You alone (trust You alone) |
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Chorus

*I will give You all my worship,
I will give You all my praise.
You alone I long to worship,
You alone are worthy of my praise.*

Opening prayers (Ruth)

Prayer of approach (111 from ‘Word in the World’)

Living God

You have promised your presence,
where two or three come together to worship You with sincerity.

Wherever a community gathers like this
You are actually there
Silently, invisibly, but truly.
What a miracle of love and grace.

You don't demand a crowd.
You seek a group of friends.

Help us to be that for you, and for each other this day
Then speak to us words of comfort and words to disturb us,
heal us of division and pain
and raise us to new commitment.

Remind us of all you have done
and challenge us to continue your work
to the glory of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Prayer of confession (118 from ‘Word in the World’)

Merciful God, we rejoice that you entered the world in Jesus Christ.

We rejoice that looking to Christ we see you, and so we know you as love:

Not soft and sentimental love,

But love that looses the shackles of sinfulness and promises a better way.

Forgive us when we fail:

As individuals, falling short of your glory;

And together as your church, when we hurt each other

And frustrate your purposes.

Forgive us that we fail to value each person’s presence amongst us

As the gift from you it is.

Forgive us and teach us how to build each other up in the truth of the gospel

And the fellowship of faith,

For the sake of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Gospel reading: Matthew 16: 13-20 (read by Andrew Bland)

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be^[d] loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Reading from the Epistles: Romans 12: 1-8 (read by Joan Catherall)

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Hymn: I will build my Church (CMP 305)

I will build my Church (I will build my church)
And the gates of hell (and the gates of hell)
Shall not prevail (shall not prevail)
Against it.
(Repeat)

*So you powers in the heavens above, bow down!
And you powers on the earth below, bow down!
And acknowledge that Jesus, Jesus, Jesus is Lord, is Lord!*

Sermon (Clare Pickering)

Do you ever wonder what the future holds for the church in today's world? What about your own church in your own town?

I teach in a Church of England village school and we have close links with the local rector who comes into school to lead assemblies and the school uses the church building for worship, particularly for special occasions such as Christmas and Easter. However, we were conscious that there weren't many opportunities for the school community and the parish community to mix. Therefore, last year, we decided not to organise a school Harvest festival during school time but invited families to the Harvest service at the church on a Sunday morning followed by a Harvest lunch. All the children were involved in preparing work that was displayed in the church but despite repeated communication, not one family turned up to that service. The only two representatives from the school were myself and the head teacher, and there were probably about 15 members of the local congregation present for what would have once been a major festival to be celebrated in a rural, farming community. Personally, I felt so despondent and couldn't help asking '*Why is church such a low priority for so many people?*'

In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus announces: 'on this rock I will build my church' in response to Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Although this declaration is retold in the gospels of Mark and Luke, Matthew is the only one to include the speech by Jesus about Peter, the rock and his church. Matthew's gospel has a strong message throughout that Jesus is the promised Messiah and, perhaps, this was included to reinforce the link to the rock in Isaiah 51, verses 1-2 where Isaiah relates the foundation of the faith back to Abraham and Sarah:

**"Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness
and who seek the LORD:
Look to the rock from which you were cut
 and to the quarry from which you were hewn;
look to Abraham, your father,
 and to Sarah, who gave you birth.
When I called him he was only one man,
 and I blessed him and made him many."**

As Abraham was the foundation of nations through his faith, Peter's faith was the rock on which Jesus was to build his church and make them many.

Surprisingly, in all three gospel accounts, Jesus then went on to tell the disciples to keep the fact that he was the Messiah to themselves. *How can you build a church if you keep things like this a secret?* I hear you ask! It was all about timing – God may have revealed this to Peter, as stated in verse 17, but

he and the other disciples did not yet have a true understanding of Jesus' mission with regard to his death and resurrection. However later on, as we read in Acts, they were able to spread the gospel and pronounce Jesus as the Messiah through the power of the Holy Spirit which led to the development of the early church. Thanks to these first witnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the conversion and faith of St Paul, Christianity became a global faith.

I started to look at some statistics and found that in 2019, there were around 2.5 billion Christians in the world (just under a third of the overall population), and Christianity is growing at a rate of 1.27%. Interestingly, Latin America and Africa now have more Christians than Europe where Christianity is barely growing.

In the UK, 2015 figures showed that church membership was around 10% of the population with actual church attendance dropping to only 5%. Within the Methodist Church, in 2018 there were 180,000 active members in the UK compared to 600,000 back in 1980.

As we all know, statistics and data can tell different stories and often raise lots of questions. One major question that struck me was: *Is there a difference between being a Christian and belonging to the Christian church?* My initial answer to this was yes because I know people who say they are Christian but never go to church, but the more I think about it, am I just seeing church as being within the four walls of a building? *Is this the type of church that Jesus said he would build?* I would suggest not – in recent times, with our church buildings closed, we have experienced the church as a community sharing the belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. If there are people who have Christian beliefs and follow the commandments given by Jesus but are not members of a formal 'Church', surely they still belong to the wider church of Christ and perhaps we need to consider how we bridge the gap.

In the reading from Romans 12, Paul emphasises that believing in, and walking with Jesus is not just about entering a church building on a Sunday morning for an hour to worship God – it is offering ourselves as living sacrifices – our entire Christian lives should be an act of worship in response to all that God has done for us. We are not just going to be in the presence of God on a Sunday morning; the outside world is not going to see us behind the doors of our churches. We need to ask ourselves: *What does God and the world see in us every day and every moment of the week?*

In verses 3-8, Paul's main purpose is to foster unity, humility and respect for each other – although directed towards the early church in Rome centuries ago, this is still so relevant today, particularly when he says 'do not think of yourself more highly than you ought'. This is perhaps something the Church still needs to grapple with – there can often be a perception that the Church as a whole, or members of the Church, think they are better than other people, or are judgemental. I like to think that there are fewer 'Christians' who are like this today, but how do we portray this to people who are outside the church? It cannot be done from inside a building, it has to be done through our day-to-day lives and social interactions.

Luckily for us, Paul continues to point out the need to recognise the God-given diversity within the church. Not everyone will feel called in the same way – this is OK! As Paul states:

'We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.'

But what is clear from Paul's message is that all Christians should be doing something proactive. Another interesting statistic I found was that only 18.3% of non-Christian people knew someone who was Christian. I realise that this statistic can only be accurate if everyone talks to others about their faith and lets it be known that they are Christian in their daily lives. If we follow Paul's advice and encouragement, our Christian faith should be an obvious and critical part of who we are. I know there are many individual Christians who live their lives in this way but we should challenge ourselves to reflect on whether we are doing all we can to truly be 'living sacrifices' to Jesus.

Jesus is still building his church in the world – Christianity is growing – the rock is still firm. However, there is more to do to reach out to both Christians who are not members of any formal Church, and to non-Christians, particularly in the UK. The calling of the Methodist Church focuses on four main elements: Worship, Learning and Caring, Service, which includes challenging injustice, and Evangelism i.e. making more followers of Jesus. Whilst we should all try to engage in all four of these, we will also have our particular gifts and strengths. Therefore, we should embrace our diversity and, as a church, complement each other - not compliment as in patting each other on the back and saying how wonderful we are, but working together as a community.

In order to ensure that the church of Christ has the potential to grow in today's society, I believe the formal Church must reach out more into the communities around them collectively, taking part in local events, making a stand against social injustice both locally and across the world, caring for the environment and demonstrating a service that makes a real difference to people's lives. The church needs to be a positive example and if more people see the church at work in their communities, they may feel that it is more relevant to their own lives and want to be part of it.

So, I leave you with two final questions – *As a Church, are we doing all we can to be a positive example?* and *What can we collectively do to reach out to our communities?*

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession (from Church of Scotland resources) (Ruth Fitch)

Listening God,

You call us to come to You with our prayers for others. And we do so in a spirit of gratitude for all the ways Your grace and mercy fills our lives ...

We thank You for creation, and for all the blessings of this life,
and, most of all, for Your boundless love in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
our redeeming presence.

Give us a constant awareness of Your mercy.

Call us to take time to immerse ourselves in Your grace.

Make us aware of signs and symbols of Your love in action.

Loving God, in Jesus Christ You taught us to pray and to offer petitions to You in His name.
Guide us by Your Holy Spirit that our prayers for others may serve Your will. You made all things in
Your wisdom, and, in Your love, You save us.

So we pray for all creation, that evil powers might be cast down, that those who hunger and thirst for
righteousness might be fed, and that all Your children might enjoy in equal measure the fruits of Your
world.

We pray for the Church. Keep us one in faith and service, so that Your Good News might be proclaimed, and so that Your love and light might be a beacons of hope and purpose in the darkest places.

We cannot love You fully unless we love our neighbours as ourselves. So we pray for our enemies and our friends; we pray for all those in need, in body, mind and spirit; we pray for all who suffer from pain and sorrow; especially any known to us whom we name before You now ...

Silence

God of compassion, bless us and those we love, that, drawing close to You, we may be drawn closer to each other. And hold us always in communion with the Saints of all the ages, especially those dear to us, in the one Kingdom of Your love.

Amen.

Hymn: Therefore the redeemed of the Lord (CMP 685)

Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return,
And come with singing unto Zion,
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head.
(Repeat)

They shall obtain gladness and joy,
And sorrow and mourning shall flee away.
Therefore the redeemed of the Lord shall return,
And come with singing unto Zion,
And everlasting joy shall be upon their head.