

Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church 2020

Sit comfortably in a quiet place and prepare, start with a brief period of silence, turning your mind and spirit towards God. You may want to have a cross or candle in view as a focus.

Opening Sentences Psalm 86:11-13

Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.
I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart;
I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your love toward me;
you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead.

Hymn StF 56 King of Glory, King of Peace (Gwalchmai)

Opening Prayers

Praise

Sovereign God,
we thank you for all those
with the courage to speak out in your name,
to declare their faith
and testify to the new life you have given them in Christ.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

We thank you for the Apostles and members of the early Church,
sent out as your witnesses in a hostile world,
enduring hostility, ridicule and persecution,
yet, despite it all, proclaiming the gospel with power.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

We thank you for those
who have acted as missionaries since that time,
giving up their security and livelihood,
often endangering health and life itself for the sake of Christ,
such was their determination to make your name known.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

We thank you for those who proclaim the gospel today,
not just overseas but here in this country,
evangelists, preachers and teachers,
each, through different ministries, calling people to faith,
sharing the message of your love.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

We praise you for Christians in places
where they face persecution,
their commitment proving costly,
their faith tested to the limit,
yet none the less working to lead others
to a saving knowledge of Christ.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

We praise you for ordinary Christians like us,
speaking of your love,
testifying to the difference you have made to their lives,
talking freely of Christ to those around them.

For their faithful witness,
receive our praise.

Gracious God,
give to all who speak for you
the words to say and the opportunity to say them,
and inspire us through their example,
so that we, in turn, may share what you have done for us,
and, through word and deed, be ambassadors for Christ.
In his name we ask it.
Amen.

Confession

Lord Jesus Christ,
we want to witness to your love,
to share with others what you have done for us,
and to reflect something of your love
through the people we are.
We want to be a light to those around us,
proclaiming your saving love through word and deed.
But we do not always know how, or where, or when.

For our failure to make you known,
Lord, have mercy.

We mean to speak out,
but, when the moment comes,
we are nervous and tongue-tied,
uncertain as to what to say,
afraid of doing more harm than good,
our clumsy efforts leading people away from you
rather than towards a consideration of your claims.

For our failure to make you known,
Lord, have mercy.

We are afraid of promising much but delivering little,
of offering enthusiastic but empty witness
that owes more to us than you,
and so we back away,
biting our tongues,
telling ourselves that next time will be different.

For our failure to make you known,
Lord, have mercy.

We are sometimes lacking in faith,
sceptical that anyone will want to listen,
and unable to believe they could really change even if they did,
and so we keep quiet,
convinced that to do otherwise
would be to waste our time and theirs.

For our failure to make you known,
Lord, have mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ,
teach us that it is not the cleverness of our words
that has the power to change lives,
but the message of your love
and the wonder of your grace.
Teach us that you can use our witness
beyond our wildest expectations
when it is offered from the heart,
a spontaneous and genuine expression of all you mean to us.
Teach us to trust in you,
confident that you will give us the words to say
when we need them,
and give us faith to leave the rest to you,
even though we may never personally see the results.
Save us from making excuses
or from evading your challenge,
and so help us, openly and honestly, to speak for you
and live to your glory.

For our failure to make you known,
Lord, have mercy.

In your name we pray. **Amen.**

Readings

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Address

A tale is told (possibly apocryphal – I can't find the original source) of a Christian missionary in Africa talking to a group of African farmers and elders, who used the Parable of the Sower as his theme. At the end of his talk he was hoping to get a response from his audience, but all he got was an embarrassed silence. He probed carefully in case he had given offence in some way. Reluctantly, one of the elders asked him if it was really true that God was the person who is the sower in the parable. When the missionary said that it was, the elder seemed even more embarrassed. Eventually he said that in that case the missionary's God was a bad farmer. No good farmer would ever throw seed around as described in the parable. Once the seed was in the ground the farmer would make sure that it was covered up so that the birds and other pests couldn't get at it. And when the crop was growing the farmer would make sure that weeds and other nuisances were got rid of so that the crop could grow properly.

But the missionary and the elder were missing the main point. When Jesus told this story to the crowd he would have been talking to a largely agricultural community, and probably they would have had exactly the same reaction as the African farmers. The point was that God was completely profligate with his gifts to make the kingdom grow. The fact that some of the seed would be wasted, or that it would be snatched up by the birds, or that it would fail to germinate properly was not the point. Some of the seed would fall onto fertile ground and its multiplication would mean that despite all the difficulties that the kingdom faced, it would grow and could not be stopped.

The passage that we read from Matthew is in two halves. The middle section, where Jesus speaks about his use of parables in order describe the coming of the kingdom has been missed out. The explanation from verse 18 about the reaction of individuals to hearing the word of God – receiving the seed – is somewhat different from the conclusion of the African farmers, and probably of Jesus' original audience. On the whole Jesus did not give explanations of his parables – he leaves them deliberately open-ended. We read the parable of the Good Samaritan but are left questioning whether the lawyer followed Jesus's advice. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son we are left with the question "what happened next"? Did the elder brother finally reconcile to his younger brother and his father? Did the younger brother carry through his intention to serve his father without reward? From time to time Jesus concluded his parables with a rhetorical flourish "whoever has ears to hear, let them hear", clearly indicating that the parable need to be puzzled through and that some people would get it and others would not. In the case of the Parable of the Sower Jesus concludes with this final sentence. So why does the explanation appear later in the chapter, concentrating on the response of individuals to the word of God?

To find an answer to this, we must look to the other passage that we read this morning - Paul's letter to the Romans. A reading from Romans is always rather difficult, I think, for congregational use. Paul's writing in the letter is complex and dense, and it often takes 2 or 3 readings before you can get the sense of it. It is an incredibly careful composition,

because Paul was writing to a Church which he had not founded, where his connections were not as personal as they were for other churches. But it was an important Christian congregation at the very centre of the Roman Empire. There had been difficulties between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. One of the issues that Paul faced in his missionary activity was the question as to whether Gentile Christians had to follow Jewish Law and practice. Originally, the post-Pentecostal Church had been a Jewish sect. We are told in Acts that they continued to attend the Temple worship. But it didn't take long before Gentile Christians were admitted to the Christian fellowship sponsored by the insights of Peter following his visit to the house of Cornelius. It is likely that the expanded Church had differences of opinions about following Jewish Law and practice. Paul was clear that Gentile Christians did not need to follow the Law. The argument about this issue in the congregation in Rome had led to more than sharp exchanges of words. The Emperor Claudius had banned the Christians from Rome because their dispute spilled out into public places and caused disorder. This could not be tolerated. When Claudius died and Nero became Emperor, he was persuaded to reverse the decision. Christians were allowed back into Rome, and it is shortly after this occurred that Paul wrote his letter. In it he is careful to encourage the Roman Christians to obey the secular authorities – there should be no repetition of the disorder that had seen their expulsion. In his letter he is trying very carefully to suggest to the Jewish Christians that the Law, though good, and part of the Christian heritage, has been effectively superseded. Instead the core practice of Christians needs to be centred around faith and belief, and not good works and adherence to the rules. Paul does this by drawing attention to the covenant that God made with the patriarchs because of their faithfulness. He goes on to point out that the Law, as it defines a remedy for sinfulness, has only temporary effect and in effect condemns rather than releases the sinner and reconciles them to God.

In this passage Paul develops his argument to say that those who follow Christ are free of condemnation because faith in Jesus is the dominating factor in their lives, compared to their previous life under the Law which was dominated by their sinful nature. He contrasts these two modes of life and then appeals to the Roman congregation to acknowledge that they are no longer controlled by their sinful nature but have been reconciled to God through the Holy Spirit. The need to follow Jewish practice and the strictures of the Law becomes unnecessary. Paul will face criticism called antinomianism for this line of argument – that he is promoting a lawless libertarian attitude. He will refute this in strong terms, but one of the issues that will be left dangling, so to speak, is the question of the freedom of the Spirit to continue and develop Christian understanding. Some issues about this have already occurred in Paul's early correspondence with the Corinthians, where he seeks to prevent disorder in worship by insisting that if somebody is moved in the Spirit to speak in tongues that the person should keep silent unless there is somebody who can interpret what he or she has said, and that the pattern of worship should not become dominated by such charismatic outbursts. As time went on, this question of the Church being moved by the Spirit into different practices and beliefs became a real issue. By the middle of the 2nd century A.D. Irenaeus and subsequently Tertullian both were writing to churches against the background of rapidly developing and divergent Christian belief and practice, particularly influenced by the thinking and leadership of Montanus, whose spirit based theological development and religious practice – Montanism – had become particularly strong in Gaul and North Africa.

The extent of this new thinking and spirit-led church development can be seen in the explosion of writings during the first and second centuries A.D. In our Church Foursquare group we've recently been looking at the development of the Bible and one of the slides I used to illustrate this tries to show the huge volume of Christian literature and writings

around that time. I reproduce this slide below to give some indication of the extent of these.

Texts of New Testament times

<p>Or....</p> <p>Treatise on the resurrection</p> <p>Apocalypse of Paul</p> <p>Apocalypse of Peter</p> <p>Coptic Apocalypse of Peter</p> <p>First thought in the three forms</p> <p>Hymn of the Pearl</p> <p>Origin of the World</p> <p>Second Treatise of Great Seth</p> <p>Secret book of John</p> <p>Shepherd of Hermas</p>	<p>▶ The New Testament</p> <p>▶ 4 Gospels</p> <p>▶ Acts</p> <p>▶ Letters - Paul, Peter, James, John</p> <p>▶ Revelation of John - an apocalypse</p> <p>▶ And.....</p> <p>Epistle of the Apostles</p> <p>Gospel of the Hebrews</p> <p>Gospel of the Ebionites</p> <p>Gospel of the Egyptians</p> <p>Gospel of Mary</p> <p>Gospel of the Nazareans</p> <p>Gospel of Nicodemus</p> <p>Gospel of Peter</p> <p>Gospel of Philip</p>	<p>Not forgetting.....</p> <p>Letter to the Laodiceans</p> <p>Letter of Peter to James</p> <p>Letter of Ptolemy to Flora</p> <p>Preaching of Peter</p> <p>Pseudo-Clementine</p> <p>Pseudo-Titus</p> <p>Gospel of the Saviour</p> <p>Coptic Gospel of Thomas</p> <p>Infancy Gospel of Thomas</p> <p>Gospel of Truth</p> <p>Papyrus Egerton 2</p> <p>Proto Gospel of James</p> <p>Secret gospel of Mark</p> <p>Acts of John</p> <p>Acts of Paul</p>	<p>Acts of Peter</p> <p>Acts of Pilate</p> <p>Acts of Thecla</p> <p>Acts of Thomas</p> <p>1 & 2 Clement</p> <p>3 Corinthians</p> <p>Letters of Paul & Seneca</p> <p>The Didache</p> <p>Epistle of Barnabas</p>
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The development of Montanism was significantly checked by two principles adopted by the Christian Church. Both were aimed at establishing an authentic voice for the Church. The first was the principle of apostolic succession. Jesus had designated Peter with authority to carry on his work after the resurrection, and by extension that had devolved to all the apostles. So the apostles would hand on their teaching down the line to their successors. This was a common pattern of philosophic movements not only in the West but also in the East. Teachers would hand down the authentic teaching to their disciples, who would in turn become teachers so there would be an unbroken chain throughout history. As the Church developed the three tier arrangement of bishops, presbyter, and deacons so it became the case that the acclamation of a new bishop could only come through the authority of other bishops, but that a bishop alone could ordain presbyters and deacons. These basic principles of apostolic succession and ordination remain keystones of traditional churches. The second way of establishing the authentic voice was to only acknowledge those writings which had come from first-hand sources of people who knew Jesus personally. The letters of Paul, Peter, and other apostles, the Gospels taken from first-hand accounts, all became key sources of authenticity. As the Gospels were written largely towards the end of the first century A.D. so they incorporated material that emphasised current issues that the churches faced.

Towards the end of that first century the Church had already faced up to the fact that those who expected Jesus to come again within the lifetime of those who knew him had not happened. Paul's letters had faced up to and given an authoritative account of the relationship of Christianity to Jewish history and the Old Testament. (This countered several "spirit-led" Christian developments which tended to treat the Old Testament as either irrelevant or evil). The Church began to organise itself for the long haul and to set out its relationship to Judaism. Initially, the Roman Empire had not been particularly interested in Christians seeing them as just another of the Jewish sects with which they familiar. The Roman Empire tended to be religiously conservative and respected the antiquity of the Jewish faith. But by the mid-60s A.D. the Roman attitude to the Jews

rapidly changed. The Jews revolted at a time when the Roman Empire was in internal disarray. When the Romans settled their own problems they descended on the rebellious Jews, crushed them, and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Christians could legitimately claim that although they had Jewish roots, they were significantly different. However this created new suspicions in the minds of the Romans, who did not like new religions because they were often associated with secretive practices that disguised anti-Roman dissent. So the Christian Church found itself under a series of persecutions, beginning with Nero, for whom the Christians were useful scapegoat for his own political failings and leadership inadequacies. Christians fell under suspicion, and under persecution several of the faithful either kept their heads down, or temporarily went along with what the authorities were requiring of them as a form of apostasy. When persecutions came to an end, questions were raised about whether such people could be readmitted to the Church, and under what circumstances. Also, as the Church began to grow so it became less a church of slaves and the poor – which Roman commentators sneered at – and instead, began to attract wealthy middle-class individuals. The explanation in the Parable of the Sower can be set against these early developing trends. The Church found itself after a period of very rapid growth as one of several spiritual and religious groups struggling for position in a deeply unequal and divided society that was facing economic problems. Not all its teaching took root – some fell upon the path. Some fell on stony ground, and when persecution came it had little root and died away – the apostates. Some appeared to be fruitful, but the demands of middle-class life choked it. But some produced fruit and the kingdom grew. The explanation is set against the developing situation at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second.

The ultimate question about whether the Church looks to its traditions and Scripture as its authentic voice or the degree to which it develops and changes through the presence of the Holy Spirit within its walls is one that still challenges us. It still causes dissension and difficulty. So, for example, I read of a debate when questions were being asked of Government Ministers who had been appointed as Church Estates Commissioners – basically to answer questions on the Anglican church in the House of Commons, reflecting the fact that it is the Established Church of the nation. For the most part these questions are usually fairly “soft” and not particularly contentious. Questions were being asked about the proposals to reopen churches following the coronavirus outbreak and the firm advice that had been given that there should be no singing or chanting. The questioner, a traditional Anglican, deplored the fact that the traditional pattern of worship according to the 1662 Prayer Book could not be followed given Government advice. The Commissioner in response suggested that a less traditional approach and one more in line with the Anglican charismatic tradition would give the questioner what they were looking for. Traditional and spirit-led worship clashed.

As we come out of the lockdown, we undoubtedly will find that the pattern of church worship is going to alter. We know that the virus will remain in the community and that there is always a danger that those who are particularly vulnerable may be concerned at the risk that they may face in worship as it was. So instead, we are going to have to balance the former pattern of worship with new, spirit-led, developments. Traditional worship will have to have regard to the wider safety of the Christian worshipping community, and to the safety of those who may come into our churches to use them or to worship with us. We have developed all sorts of different approaches as a Church over the lockdown, and some of these have reached the parts of the community and other communities that haven't customarily worshipped with us. We going to have to think hard about how we can make the best of what we have developed to become a permanent feature of our pattern of worship. Just like the Early Church took the original teaching of

Jesus and interpreted it for the circumstances that they faced, so we are going to have to take our worship and adapt it to the new circumstances that we will face. We will need to reinterpret the authenticity of Christ's teaching as we have it while seeking the Holy Spirit's guidance into how we can throw the seed more widely, and in ways that will make the kingdom grow.

Meditation/Reflection

We bind to ourselves today
the nurturing Parent,
the befriending Christ,
the blowing Spirit.

Hymn StF 415 The Church of Christ, in every age (Herongate)

Prayer of Intercession

Gathered together as the people of God, and attentive to his will, let us pray.
Heavenly Father, may your words of truth take root in our hearts and grow to rich maturity
May we hear your will for us and act upon it;
may we take seriously our responsibility to encourage
and nurture one another in faith at every age and every stage.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:
your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, may every act of selfless giving
and every search for truth be richly blessed and rewarded;
Disturb assumptions and lead
many to ponder more deeply
the spiritual dimension of their lives.
May the word of God reach all who are ready to receive it,
and let us set no boundaries here as to who they might be.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:
your word is life and strength.

your word is life and strength.
Heavenly Father, make our homes
places of love and growth,
welcoming to all who visit them,
and accepting and forgiving to all who are nurtured there.
Help us through the quarrels and heartaches
and remind us to honour one another
as your cherished ones.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:
your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, may all whose bodies,
souls or minds are aching
know the comforting and strengthening power
of your companionship, and the healing work of your love.
May we be more ready
to support and befriend one another
through the difficult times,
in the name and love of the God we worship.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:
your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, we pray for all
who are making the journey through physical death,
as they put down earthly things
and wake to your presence.
Bring us all to share with them
your life in all its fullness.

Silence

Eternal truth, living God:
your word is life and strength.

Heavenly Father, the rain and sunshine,
the growing and harvesting,
sing to us of your faithful love,
and we offer you our thankful praise for all your gifts to us.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say.....

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn StF 412 See how great a flame aspires (St George's Windsor)

Blessing

The seed is sown,
the kingdom is growing,
God is at work among us.
Offer him your love, your faith and your life,
and, in bearing fruit in his service,
may the time of harvest draw nearer.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.