

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 34:1-3

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.
I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

Hymn StF 75 From all who dwell below the skies (Lasst Uns Erfreuen)

From all that dwell below the skies
Let the Creator's praise arise:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Let the Redeemer's name be sung
Through every land, by every tongue.

*Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Alleluia!*

Eternal are Thy mercies, Lord;
Eternal truth attends Thy word:
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thy praise shall sound from shore to shore,
Till suns shall rise and set no more.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLc09-5bpbq&feature=share>

Opening Prayers

Prayer of Praise

Praise be to you, O God,
who answer us when we call upon you,
slow though we are to answer you when you call us.
Praise be to you, O God,
who give to us when we ask,
miserly though we are when you ask of us.
Praise be to you, O God,
to whom we confide our needs and they are satisfied.
Praise be to you, O God,

for you are most worthy of praise. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Heavenly Father, we confess our sins to you:
the sins of the past and of the present;
those hidden and forgotten
as well as those remembered;
our sins of thought and desire, of word, of deed and of omission;
the sins that we are too dull of heart to see;
the sins that others can see and we cannot;
the sins known to you alone.

We are sorry for all of them.
We ask you to forgive us
through the merit of Jesus, our Saviour.
Please renew your life in us
by the power of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Psalm 130 (set for this Sunday) which we sing as:

Hymn StF 433 Out of the depths I cry to thee (St Martin)

Out of the depths I cry to thee,
Lord God! O hear my prayer!
Incline a gracious ear to me,
and bid me not despair:
If thou rememberest each misdeed,
If each should have its rightful meed,
Lord, who shall stand before thee?

'Tis through thy love alone we gain
the pardon of our sin;
the strictest life is but in vain,
our works can nothing win;
that none should boast himself of aught,
but own in fear thy grace hath wrought
what in him seemeth righteous.

Wherefore my hope is in the Lord,
my works I count but dust;
I build not there, but on his word,
and in his goodness trust.
Up to his care myself I yield,
he is my tower, my rock, my shield,
and for his help I tarry.

And though it linger till the night,
and round again till morn,
my heart shall ne'er mistrust thy might,
nor count itself forlorn.
Do thus, O ye of Israel's seed,
ye of the Spirit born indeed,
wait for your God's appearing.

Though great our sins and sore our wounds,
and deep and dark our fall,
his helping mercy hath no bounds,
his love surpasseth all:
our trusty loving Shepherd, he
who shall at last set Israel free
from all their sin and sorrow.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dea0blzGKfE&feature=share>

Readings:

Romans 3:22-24

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 7:14-25

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Address: The Thin Veneer

The Letter to the Romans is complex in language and theology. But just occasionally the emotional Paul, rather than the thinking Paul, peeks through. This passage is one of them. Which of us does not empathise with Paul when he says that he doesn't understand how it is that he wants to do good but finds himself being compromised with sin. And it's the ubiquitous nature of sinfulness that I want to talk about this morning.

In 1954 an English teacher at a boys public school wrote a book in which he imagined what would happen if a group of pre-teenage boys found themselves for an extended

period without adult supervision, based on his experience of boy's behaviour. The Lord of the Flies proved to be an instant bestseller for its author William Golding. It has never been out of print since and has become part of the modern literature syllabus for most English language examinations. It launched him on a writing career which ultimately led to him receiving the Nobel Prize for literature. In the book a group of schoolboys find themselves cast away on a tropical island without any adults. They immediately elect Ralph, a popular charismatic boy, as their leader. Ralph declares, rather as a politician would, that his manifesto will be that the boys will enjoy themselves, keep safe, and make sure that they have a bonfire that is kept going all the time to signal to any passing ship. The boys certainly manage the first part of his manifesto, but neglect to keep the fire going so that a ship passes without them being able to signal to it. As time goes on things deteriorate, the boys become wilder and more aggressive, and indulge in pagan-like rituals. By the time the boys rescued four boys are dead, including Piggy, an overweight, short-sighted, and asthmatic boy who nevertheless makes intelligent and sensible suggestions which are largely ignored by the other boys who bully him to death. The naval lieutenant who confronts the boys and the chaos of their created wilderness is shocked. "I rather thought the group of English schoolboys would have made a better show than this", he comments to Ralph – who promptly breaks down in tears at "the loss of his innocence".

The underlying trope, or pattern of thinking, is that the social conditioning that makes life possible is but a thin veneer, and that underneath we rapidly resort to selfish animal instincts. It was not difficult for Golding to sell this idea in his book, given that when he wrote it the communal memories of Auschwitz, Treblinka, Belsen, and Dachau were still very much in people's minds. The natural tendency of people to revert to selfish bad behaviour has a long history. St Augustine writing in the later 4th century suggested that the disobedience of humankind to God's will and plan as evidenced in the Genesis story of the Fall was so ingrained that we suffered from "original sin" and that even the youngest baby was born into a sinful existence. The anonymous medieval author of "Piers Plowman" decries the sins of the rich saying that they are "hinged on them like a lid". During that period the Western Catholic Church developed a pattern of theology and practice based on the idea that at death we paid for our sins by a period in Purgatory before we were allowed into Heaven, which could be shortened by the purchases of indulgences, or by undertaking good works. Luther and the Protestant reformers rebelled against the Church's regime, which they saw as undermining the true life in the Spirit which Paul talks about. Luther confessed his sins for hours and became convinced that only through God's grace could he be saved. He complained to his weary Confessor "Why is God angry with me", only to be told "Martin, God is not angry with you. You are angry with God". The French Protestant Reformer Jean Calvin had an even lower view of human sinfulness than Augustine or Luther. In his opinion we were so steeped in sin that most of us were heading for damnation, and that only a small portion – God's Elect – would be saved and only by a life of the strictest spiritual adherence. Even that strict life could not guarantee that you were one of God's Elect – that had been decided in God's plan before the beginning of time.

It was not just religious teachers and reformers who thought in this way. Thinkers of the Enlightenment also had a dim view of humanity. They were determined to show that human existence and behaviour could be explained by reference to reason, rather than an appeal to any religious belief or revelation. Thomas Hobbes, writing in "Leviathan" tried to address the question of why human beings would give up their liberty to become subservient to a Government, without reference to the appointment of Kings by God. Writing as he did in the period immediately after the English Civil War he wished to dispense with the "divine right of kings". For Hobbes the natural nature of man was

“solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”! It was for reasons of security and safety that we followed the dictates of Government.

So widespread was this interpretation of human beings as being steeped in sin with the thinnest veneer of social civilisation that professors of Psychology in the period immediately before the outbreak of the Second World War confidently predicted that civilian populations subjected to the kind of violence by bombing that had been experienced by troops in the trenches of the First World War that they would become “shellshocked” in the language of the day. These days we would call it Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. They expected that if London were bombed 3 to 4 million people would flee into the country in panic and that thousands would break down mentally and have to be put in hospitals. Government planning for the time allowed for both things to happen. But it didn’t happen. Instead Londoners who experienced the Blitz, and other cities throughout the country as well, found a certain grim camaraderie and solidarity of spirit. That isn’t to say that everybody behaved unselfishly, but there was no mass panic and people looked after those more vulnerable and weaker than themselves wherever they could. Counter examples where people found themselves in extreme stress and where panic and survival didn’t displace care for others are not hard to find. When the Titanic went down in 1912, survivors remarked on the lack of panic, and the insistence that it was “women and children first” even when it became obvious that there were insufficient lifeboats to rescue everyone. So perhaps it isn’t true that everyone is out for themselves and that sin is ingrained in humankind.

Perhaps the ultimate counterexample to the “Lord of the Flies” scenario came in the mid-1960s. A group of Tongan schoolboys, bored at their existence in a Catholic school on the island, decided to steal a boat from a fisherman who had been nasty to them, and sail away on an adventure. They assemble sufficient food & drink for their journey but being pre-teenage boys they neglected to bring a map or compass. Their plan went wrong. Caught in a storm they went off course and they were shipwrecked on a little island called ‘Ata which was an uninhabited volcanic rocky outcrop, miles from any normal shipping lane. The six boys were marooned on the island for the best part of 18 months, until they were picked up by a lobster fisherman who was looking for new fishing grounds that were not licensed. All the boys were safe, they were physically fit and well, and they had provided themselves with shelter, food, clean water, and had generally behaved well. When asked about arguments, they said that there had been disagreements, but they had devised a strategy for dealing with such issues. The antagonists were sent to opposite sides of the island until they had had sufficient time to cool down. When they were brought back together again for a discussion on the contentious issue, the boys had found that generally apologies and a compromise were achievable. “The Lord of the Flies” it was not.

So what of the common expectation, which surveys suggest is held by three quarters of us, that placed under stress we will rapidly abandon our social conditioning in favour of self-interest, that we will revert in fact to our sinful nature? What if it is not true? What if the opposite is the case – as suggested by other philosophers, like Jean Jacques Rousseau – that we are basically decent and recognise the value of being in a social group and are therefore prepared to be altruistic and put our own interests aside in favour of looking after the most vulnerable, and being more caring. Haven’t we seen that during the current covert crisis? People have “gone the extra mile” and put themselves at risk to help others. Frontline NHS staff, care workers, and key workers have all been praised for their selfless devotion. The national and local media have included heart-warming stories of people who have put themselves out to help. And it isn’t only at a high level that we’ve seen this. There are lots of instances of small acts of kindness and consideration for others, of offers of

assistance and looking out for the vulnerable that we have all seen. Instead of interpreting Paul's message of the battle within his own being between his conscience and his self-interest as showing a tendency to original sin, is it instead merely indicating something that we all feel – that internal battle that we have with ourselves in any stressful social situation. What would it say about our mission if we looked at Paul's open expression of his feelings in this way? I think it would say quite a lot.

The traditional approach of a stereotypical tub-thumping preacher is like some marketing that we experience. One of the common marketing techniques is to suggest that you have a problem, and then immediately offer you a solution to that problem. One of the most difficult issues is when that problem is personal, and the product being sold is one that people would not normally buy but feel that they must. The classic is deodorant. You can give offence to someone by suggesting that they, or their home, smells. After years of being told that you have something that “only your best friend will tell you” – BO (body odour) - we all got accustomed to the idea that we buy deodorants. Unfortunately, manufacturers of deodorants found that the market became saturated, so recently they've moved to persuading us to buy deodorants for the home. But telling somebody that their home smells is as offensive as telling them they've got body odour. So the ad softens the blow by suggesting that it's perfectly natural for soft furnishings to give back smells and that though your house stinks of curry, wet dog, or cheesy feet, you won't notice it because you've gone “nose blind”. You may not recognise the smell, but if you purchase the deodorant, then your guest or friend, who appears at the end of the advert, will find your home refreshing and perfumed and will look favourably upon you.

The tub-thumping preacher stereotype will try to persuade the congregation in front of them that they have gone “sin blind”. They are steeped in their sins, but they do not recognise it – but the preacher has the solution and that is to put one's faith in Jesus Christ and commit your life to him. But quite a lot of people don't feel particularly sinful – and a substantial number may live very good, caring, and socially worthwhile lives. They are unlikely to respond positively. On the other hand, there may be those who go “over-the-top” in false humility. As the Christian doggerel has it:

*Of sinners Lord, I am the chief,
my angel from behind,
said, “vanity you little man”.
You're nothing of the kind!*

But if the preacher looked upon humankind is not being steeped in original sin, but basically kind and loving, how much more positive would the message become? Wouldn't it be closer to what Paul is trying to say to acknowledge that within us there is both good and bad? There is an apocryphal parable that runs:

“An old man says to his grandson “There's a fight going on inside me. It's a terrible fight between two wolves. One is evil – angry, greedy, jealous, arrogant, and cowardly. The other is good – peaceful, loving, modest, generous, honest, and trustworthy. These two wolves are also fighting within you and inside every other person too”. After a moment the boy asks, “Which wolf will win?” The old man smiles. “The one you feed”.

Is that not closer to what Paul is saying? And isn't it more positive in our ministry to suggest that faith in Christ is all about feeding the good wolf. Isn't it more positive to address someone who has a real problem of sinfulness without condemning them? I recall

a story about someone in an office really did have a body odour problem – they smelled. The individual’s colleagues were too embarrassed to say anything about it, so they approached the boss to ask him to deal with it. He called the person into the office and said to them “There is a problem – you smell. Now what are **we** going to do about it?” Getting alongside someone with a problem is generally better than confronting them with it.

Think about the wider aspects in the world. Those who follow the “thin veneer” version of humanity will emphasise the importance of compulsion and authority. They will say, like Hobbes, “give us power, or all is lost”. Those like Rousseau with a more generous concept of humankind and who think that compulsion and authority is frequently misused would say “give us liberty, or all is lost”. It’s an argument that runs through many of our political decisions. Do we compel people, because they can’t be trusted, or do we give people freedom in the expectation that they will use it wisely and in the best interests of the community? Again, think of our current crisis. The Government has laid down certain strict rules, but it recognises that it is dependent on people’s goodwill and understanding to make sure that those rules are properly enforced. It has made it clear that it has the power to compel, but if it were to call upon the police and the army to do so, it would be an acknowledgement of its failure to convince and communicate.

It is pretty fundamental, for it seems to me that if we adopt a more generous view of humankind we must acknowledge that Augustine’s “original sin” was based on his violent opposition thinking of Pelagius, who held the view that Christians could improve and become closer to God in their Christian pilgrimage through life. Augustine, who was something of an authoritarian character, was insistent that Pelagius’ thinking would undermine the authority of the Church – by diminishing its role in confession – and would replace Christian thinking about salvation coming through the grace of God the doctrine of salvation by good works. Luther, who was an Augustinian monk, agreed with him. Pelagius wasn’t suggesting that, but in order to win his argument Augustine was quite happy to distort Pelagius’s argument and associate him with the thinking of the Arians who were decidedly unorthodox in their belief about Jesus. The Western Catholic Church sided with Augustine in this argument and eventually condemned Pelagius as a heretic, which modern scholars now see as being inspired by political rather than theological reasons. The idea that a more generous view of humankind leads to the situation where we can improve our relationship with God was one that Wesley held. In his “Plain Account of Christian Perfection” he explains what he means, in opposition to the Calvinistic theology which so dominated his own time. Wesley acknowledged the two wolves, and that “all have sinned and fallen short” and needed forgiveness, but this was humankind “missing the mark” – which is the meaning of the Greek word hamartia which is usually translated as sin. If you “miss the mark” then of course you can always have another shot at it. But if you believe that you’re steeped in sin, what’s the point? You are doomed to failure, at least in Calvin’s view. Wesley would not have this, he preached that all could be saved, all could know that they were saved, and in that declaration of Christian perfection, all could be saved to the uttermost.

Perhaps it’s time to change our marketing assumptions for Christ?

Prayer/Meditation

Lord, make our hearts a haven
where the lonely may find friendship,
where the weary may find shelter,

where the helpless may find refuge,
where the hopeless may find hope,
where all those who seek someone who cares
may enter and find you.

Hymn StF 499 Great God your love has called us here (Abingdon)

Great God, your love has called us here,
as we, by love for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed;
we come, with all our heart and mind
your call to hear, your love to find.

We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems close confined,
yet seeking hope for humankind.

Great God, in Christ you call our name,
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right or claim,
but by your gracious love alone;
we strain to glimpse your mercy seat
and find you kneeling at our feet.

Then take the towel, and break the bread,
and humble us, and call us friends.
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
and show how grandly love intends
to work till all creation sings,
to fill all worlds, to crown all things.

Great God, in Christ you set us free
your life to live, your joy to share.
give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do
while love is making all things new.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFrwAn_-zLY&feature=share

Prayer of Intercession

Let us pray to God, who has promised to hear us
and is always true to his word.

We pray for the world-wide Christian family;
that it may offer hope
to the despairing,
peace to the distressed,
fulfilment to those who seek,
and refreshment to the weary.

Silence

Lord, you are our strength:
we believe and trust in you.

We pray for a shrinking world
and those whose authority can affect it
for good or ill;
that we may all learn
to trust one another
and forgive each other
more readily.

Silence

Lord, you are our strength:
we believe and trust in you.

We bring before their Creator
those who are chronically ill
and in constant pain;
those who are frightened by their illness
and those who are approaching death;
that they may receive the sustaining peace of Christ,
who knows them personally,
and whose love for them extends even through death itself.

Silence

Lord, you are our strength:
we believe and trust in you.

We ask God's blessing upon
members of our own families
with their particular needs and difficulties;
on our own lives and spiritual growth;
that we may learn to trust more in God than in ourselves,
and be alert to his guidance each day.

Silence

Lord, you are our strength:
we believe and trust in you.

We pray in silence to God
who created us and knows our needs.

God our Father,
accept our prayers;
as we learn to trust more in your love,
may we grow to be more like Christ and reflect the radiance of his love;
through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us when we pray to say.....

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom,
the power and the glory
are yours,
now and for ever. Amen.**

Hymn StF 503 Love divine, all loves excelling (Blaenwern)

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down:
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love and praise!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGGcqhKShQ8&feature=share>

Blessing

May the rich blessing of the Lord be with us, and forgive our sins.
May the Lord graciously protect us from all evil and keep us in all good.
May he who created and redeemed us keep us for himself without blemish to the end.
Amen.