

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 149 v1-5

Praise the LORD.

Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people.
Let Israel rejoice in their Maker; let the people of Zion be glad in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp.
For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with victory.
Let his faithful people rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds.

Hymn StF 83 Praise my soul the King of Heaven

Praise my soul, the King of heaven,
To His feet thy tribute bring;
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Who like thee his praises shall sing;
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise the everlasting King.

Praise Him, for His grace and favour,
To his people in distress;
Praise Him, still the same for ever,
Slow to chide and swift to bless,
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Glorious in His faithfulness.

Father-like he tends and spares us,
Well our feeble frame he knows,
In his hands he gently bears us,
Rescues us from all our foes.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Widely as his mercy flows.

Angels in the height, adore Him,
Ye behold Him face to face;
Sun and moon bow down before Him,
Dwellers all in time and space.
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise him! Praise him!
Praise with us the God of grace.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sx1eMwIDFb8>

Opening Prayers

Praise

Unto you, O Lord, be praise for every flower that ever grew,
every bird that ever flew,
every wind that ever blew.
Unto you, O Lord, be praise for every flake of virgin snow,
every place where humans go,
every joy and every woe.
Unto you, O Lord, be praise for every life that shall be born,
every heart that shall be torn,
every day and every dawn.

Confession

Jesus; you were driven to the sands
by the searching Spirit.
Strip from us what is not of you.
Forgive us for
our selfish deeds,
our empty speech
and the words with which we have wounded.
Forgive us for
our false desires,
our vengeful attitudes
and for what we have left untended.

Psalm 119:33-40

Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, **that I may follow it to the end.**

Give me understanding, **so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart.**

Direct me in the path of your commands, **for there I find delight.**

Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to your word.

Fulfil your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

Take away the disgrace I dread, for your laws are good.

How I long for your precepts! **In your righteousness preserve my life.**

Readings

OT Ezekiel 33:7-11

"Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

"Son of man, say to the Israelites, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?"' Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'

Epistle Romans 13:8-14

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Hymn StF 649 God! When human bonds are broken

God! When human bonds are broken
and we lack the love or skill
to restore the hope of healing,
give us grace and make us still.

Through that stillness, with your Spirit
come into our world of stress,
for the sake of Christ forgiving
all the failures we confess.

You in us are bruised and broken:
hear us as we seek release
from the pain of earlier living;
set us free and grant us peace.

Send us, God of new beginnings,
humbly hopeful into life;
use us as a means of blessing:
make us stronger, give us faith

Give us faith to be more faithful,
give us hope to be more true,
give us love to go on learning:
God! Encourage and renew!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Dpu9HYOO2k>

Address – Speak truth unto power.

When I worked in local government I would sometimes begin my reports to councillors with the words "(Council) members will recall", when I meant that in their busy lives they probably wouldn't remember the previous conversations so I was taking this opportunity to briefly summarise the earlier discussion. So I hope my readers and listeners today will not take it amiss when I begin this address with the words "as you will recall" the last time that I prepared a service in this series I took as my subject human sinfulness. I suggested then that rather than take the traditional attitude of St Augustine or John Calvin, or even the philosophers of the Enlightenment and social psychologists of our own era, that humankind was inherently sinful and there was only a thin veneer of civilisation that kept us from asserting that selfishness and self-assertive behaviour which would rapidly come to the fore in periods of stress. I suggested instead, taking my examples from the book "Human Kind" by Rutger Bregman, that there was a streak of altruism and cooperative behaviour in all of us that was just as likely to assert itself. I used the analogy of the two wolves – the evil Wolf and the good Wolf – to suggest that we had the capacity for good and evil in all of us, and it was a case of which Wolf we chose to feed. I suggested that if we took this more generous attitude to human behaviour then we would be less condemnatory of those who had sinned – "missed the mark" – as it is in Greek, and would be more likely to get alongside people and empathise with them.

One of the stories I told then was of a colleague of mine who had had to deal with an individual with poor personal hygiene which was offensive to his colleagues. Faced with a

tricky situation Alan had spoken to the individual saying "there is a problem here – you smell. Now what are we going to do about it". And that in a way provides the jumping off point for this address, for the lectionary readings that we have had this morning are all about the contentious issues of wrongdoing and conflict, particularly within church situations. Now when I told other people about Alan's interview with the odoriferous colleague most people take a sharp intake of breath. What Alan did was risky. It's not easy to tell someone about a personal issue like that. As the music hall song has it:

*"Two lovely black eyes,
oh what a surprise,
only for telling a man he was wrong,
two lovely black eyes!"*

People take offence and can become hostile. Most of us like to avoid hostility, and so will often put up with unacceptable behaviour and attitudes for the sake of keeping the peace. But this was not what Ezekiel was told to do by God. Ezekiel, a near contemporary of Jeremiah, was one of the prophets at the time of the Exile of the Jewish people into Babylon. Things had gone wrong, and the Prophets upbraided the people of Israel for their behaviour which was contrary to the wishes of God. In the passage we read God tells Ezekiel that he is to be like a watchman to the people of Israel. He is to warn, to bring attention to the danger that exists, and not to stint in those warnings. If he does the job properly then he will be exonerated if people do not listen to him and follow his advice; but if he tempers his warnings or turns a blind eye to unacceptable behaviour then he will be responsible for the consequences of the sinfulness of Israel. God makes it clear that his intention here is to seek remorse, repentance, and reform. He does not wish to punish Israel for its sins.

It is hard to be a watchman. To give advice gratuitously, or to point out the consequences of behaviour or actions to another person or persons can be difficult and dangerous work. When I was appointed to senior positions in local authorities the councillors often asked me about the relationship between themselves as decision takers and myself as their key adviser. I made it clear that the roles were separate – they were responsible for taking the decisions – but I was responsible for making sure that they had the best advice and information to do so. I wanted them to listen to me, and question me on the advice that I was giving, but ultimately if they chose to ignore it, then that was up to them. In professional public servant circles this is often referred to as "speaking truth unto power", an ancient concept that goes back to the Greeks who called it parrhesia. For local authority officers this was often less fraught with danger that it was for civil servants, because local authority officers are appointed by and to the Council, and must then give impartial advice to all members of the Council whether they are in power or in opposition. Civil servants are employed by the Government and give advice only in the Government's interest. Only when a General Election is looming are they empowered to speak and discuss issues with the Opposition. So becomes more of a threat for them to associate their advice only with the attitudes and prejudices of the prevailing administration, and to temper that advice to what their masters wish to hear, rather than what they should hear. In my career I have found myself in hot water on several occasions by telling councillors of all persuasions things that they didn't like to hear. Ultimately your ability to do this depends upon personal integrity, a sense of public duty rather than factional interest, and a relationship of trust between yourself and the local authority members. When that trust breaks down, things start to go wrong. I have seen colleagues dismissed or harried from office by bullying members who are determined to get their own way. I have also seen those members sent to prison for corruption. The present difficulties that the Government

is having with its senior civil servants are symptomatic of a diminishing level of trust. Replacing a watchman with somebody who will only say what you want to hear – sycophants – is a recipe for disaster. The Borgia Pope, Alexander VI, made two telling statements – one at the beginning of his papacy and one at the end. At the beginning he said, "God has given us this papacy, now let us enjoy it!", so indicating that his personal ambitions and lust for power supplanted his responsibilities to the wider Church. Desperate for money he encouraged the sale of indulgences and as a result undermined the moral authority the Western Catholic Church and created the circumstances in which Christendom underwent the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Church, as he knew it, was subsequently destroyed. At the end of his papacy he said sadly "we began our papacy by not wishing to hear the truth, and we ended it by not being able to hear it". Those who had warned had been replaced by those who spoke soft words.

So we are encouraged to speak up against bad behaviour and attitudes wherever they are found, inside or outside the Church. In the passage that we read from Paul's letter to the Romans we find him summing up his long and detailed argument about the relationship the Christian to the Jewish Law with some practical advice. You will recall that Paul was writing to the Christians in Rome who had been racked by division and conflict over the question as to whether Gentile Christians were required to keep the Jewish Law. Paul was firmly of the opinion that they did not as many of his other letters show. So intense had this conflict been that it had spilled out into public disorder and the Emperor Claudius had banned the Christians from Rome. The new emperor, Nero, readmitted them and Paul was writing his letter in this context. In it he extensively deals with the question of the status of the Jewish Law for those who'd put their faith in Jesus Christ. It was not that the Law was wrong, but it had been superseded in that people were put right with God by faith in Jesus, and not by keeping the details of the Jewish Law. But Paul had been accused of antinomianism – being against the Law – and thus giving licence to all sorts of unacceptable behaviour in Jewish eyes. He had strenuously denied this in what he had said in the letter "shall we sin the more so that grace may abound? Certainly not!" as a traditional translation has it. Here, towards the end of his letter Paul begins to reflect on the immediate consequences of what he has said. He begins the chapter by commending the Christians to obey the Roman authorities – no more riots here – because the authorities have been "appointed by God". (That phrase was to have disastrous consequences throughout history as it was used to support the autocratic regimes of monarchs). For the same reason Christians were exhorted to pay taxes, customs duties, and to show due respect.

The conflict between the Christians in Rome was indicative of the breakdown of trust and love between the factions. Paul now goes on in this passage to commend these groups to settle their differences in love and charity. Do this, Paul says, and you will not only fulfil your Christian duty, but you will also fulfil the obligations and intentions of the Jewish Law. It is a compromise formula, that can appeal to both sides of the argument. Paul then goes on to speak about the freedom Christians have in terms of behaviour. Free of the restrictions of the Jewish Law he does not want them to conform to the popular, and in his eyes, immoral behaviour of the Roman people. So no to orgies, sexual immorality, debauchery, and drunkenness. And no to the dissension and jealousy so often seen Roman political life. Instead, they are to immerse themselves in following the teaching of Jesus. Here is Paul giving advice which his hearers may not have wished to hear, but which is in their best interests. Paul sets this against an understanding that he had that the hour for Jesus's return was imminent. As it turned out this was not the case, but it is an object lesson in seeking a proper compromise to conflict within the Church.

This role of watchman is not confined to the prophets and reformers of the Church – like Ezekiel or Paul – but applies to all of us, as the passage we read from Matthew's gospel makes clear. Now this passage must be read in context. There is a widespread understanding that Matthew's gospel was substantially re-edited from an earlier, probably Aramaic, version that circulated in and around Jerusalem. When this was subsequently re-edited and translated into Greek – the version that we have – the editor had access to additional material that was also available to Luke. As a result are several duplicates that appear in Matthew's gospel – there are two accounts of the feeding of the crowd, one for four thousand and one for five thousand. There are two teachings of Jesus about the question of marriage, divorce, and adultery – one set in a very Jewish rabbinic argument, and one short statement that almost exactly mirrors that in Luke. And at the end of this passage we find the statements about the Church's ability to bind or loose on earth be mirrored in heaven, similar to that which Jesus also says to Peter when he raises the question "Who do people say that I am?" on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Because the editing takes place a little later it often reflects the situation in the Early Church, rather than the pre-Pentecost period of Jesus's teaching. So it is here. If you find that your brother (or sister) sins (which may be against you or maybe not, for the words "against you" are not found in all translations) then you are to take it up with them privately – getting alongside them rather than condemning them – and hope that they will hear the words that they would prefer not to hear and respect your love and integrity. If not, then it steps up to another level where the same issues are taken up, but this time it becomes slightly more legalistic and that there are now witnesses to the issue being raised. If this doesn't work, then the whole Church is involved – which indicates that this is in a much later context – and if that doesn't work then the person has placed themselves outside the Church's jurisdiction. This is a much more legalistic process; it critically depends upon the collective wisdom of the Church to finally decide the matter – hence the following sentences confirming that authority on the Church.

But the consequences – effectively excommunication – are serious. So, like the watchman giving advice and raising warnings, we had better be sure of our facts, and the soundness of our advice. There has been many a conflict between individuals or groups that has been based on misunderstandings what was said or meant. And the ground of our understanding shifts over time as circumstances alter. The Roman world was built on slavery, it could not function without it, and Paul's letters accept slavery as the norm – as is also indicated in the Old Testament with its acknowledgement of economic slavery. So it remained in the minds of most Christians until a Quaker, Benjamin Lay, interpreted Paul's admonition that in Christ there was no male or female, slave or free, to indicate that God's impartial love for everyone meant that treating another human being as an object to be owned rather than individual was unacceptable. He first persuaded the Society of Friends that slavery was incompatible with Christianity, and bit by bit that understanding spread so that slavery became not only unacceptable but illegal. Unfortunately, it is still with us in a modern guise, and work still needs to be done to free the world for its pernicious presence. Our thinking and our understanding of our common humanity is leading us to similar debates on issues of gender, race, and sexuality.

We cannot simply stick with the rigidity of past thinking. As TS Eliot puts it, as we grow older, so we experience:

*.....the conscious impotence of rage
at human folly, and the laceration
of laughter at what ceases to amuse.
And last, the rending pain of re-enactment*

*of all that you have done, and been; the shame
of motives late revealed, and the awareness
of things ill done and done to others' harm
which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fool's approval stings, and honour stains.*

As I said, being a watchman is a hard and difficult task. But it is one that we are all called to.

Prayer/Meditation

Enrich, Lord, heart
 hands, mouth in me
with faith, with hope,
 and charity.
That I may run, rise, rest in Thee

Hymn StF 249 Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love

Jesu, Jesu,
 *fill us with your love,
 show us how to serve
 the neighbours we have from you.*

Kneels at the feet of his friends,
silently washes their feet,
master who acts as a slave to them

Neighbours are rich folk and poor,
neighbours are black folk and white,
neighbours are nearby and far away.

These are the ones we should serve,
these are the ones we should love,
all these are neighbours to us and you.

Kneel at the feet of our friends,
silently washing their feet,
this is the way we should live with you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2T0KRFBAnkA>

Prayer of Intercession

In our need and human weakness,
let us come to Almighty God with our prayers.
Unchanging God, change us from the heart
until the whole Church awakens to your love that reaches out, nurtures and celebrates,
neither holding back from what is difficult,
nor rushing where angels fear to tread.
We pray for sensitivity and courage.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
and lead us.

Almighty God, give us such love for the world
that we may pray with longing and desire, 'Your kingdom come.'
Give our leaders the grace to see
their work as service and their role as stewards;
and sharpen both the recognition of needs
and the commitment to just provision.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
and lead us.

Merciful God, break all habits of destructive behaviour
in our homes and families, our friendships and in all the homes of this village.
Develop our ability to celebrate what is good and face what is not with honesty.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
and lead us.

Healing God, lay your hands on those who suffer,
so that they may know the support of your presence
and find wholeness and peace in your love.
We pray especially for those who are locked
into the conviction
that they are beyond your forgiveness.
May they quickly discover
the freedom of your acceptance.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
and lead us.

Eternal God, in your unchanging love receive
all those who have died in faith, that they may rejoice in you for ever.

Silence

Lord, take us by the hand:
and lead us.

Gracious God, we thank you for providing us with a sure hope in which we can face the
worst and not be overwhelmed.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ, 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 715 The right hand of God is writing in our land

The right hand of God is writing in our land,
writing with power and with love;
our conflicts and our fears,
our triumphs and our tears,
are recorded by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is pointing in our land,
pointing the way we must go;
so clouded is the way,
so easily we stray,
but we're guided by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is striking in our land,
striking out at envy, hate and greed;
our selfishness and lust,
our pride and deeds unjust,
are destroyed by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is lifting in our land,
lifting the fallen one by one;
each one is known by name,
and lifted now from shame,
by the lifting of the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is healing in our land,
healing broken bodies, minds and souls;
so wondrous is its touch,
with love that means so much,
when we're healed by the right hand of God.

The right hand of God is planting in our land,
planting seeds of freedom, hope and love,
in these many-peopled lands,
let his children all join hands,
And be one with the right hand of God.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUqaj0ND-Xg>

Blessing

God be with you at each stop and each sea,
at each lying down and each rising up,
in the trough of the waves, on the crest of the billows,
each step of the journey you take. **Amen.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plAP-WXAwHg>