

# Church at home

East Leake Methodist Church 2021

*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 139:1-6**

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.  
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.  
You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.  
Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.  
You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

## ❖ **Hymn StF 591 Let all mortal flesh keep silence**

Let all mortal flesh keep silence,  
and with fear and trembling stand;  
ponder nothing earthly-minded,  
for with blessing in his hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
our full homage to demand.

King of kings, yet born of Mary,  
as of old on earth he stood,  
Lord of lords, in human vesture,  
in the body and the blood -  
he will give to all the faithful  
his own self for heavenly food.

Rank on rank the host of heaven  
spreads its vanguard on the way,  
as the Light of light descendeth  
from the realms of endless day,  
that the powers of hell may vanish  
as the darkness clears away.

At his feet the six-winged seraph,  
cherubim, with sleepless eye,  
veil their faces to the Presence,  
as with ceaseless voice they cry:  
alleluia, alleluia,  
alleluia, Lord most high.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wl4u8lnDQs>

### ❖ Opening Prayers

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.**

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.**

Eternal Light, shine into our hearts,  
Eternal Goodness, deliver us from evil,  
Eternal Power, be our support,  
Eternal Wisdom, scatter the darkness of our ignorance,  
Eternal Pity, have mercy upon us,  
that with all our heart and mind  
and soul and strength  
we may seek your face  
and be brought by your infinite mercy  
to your holy presence,

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

❖ **Reading 1 Samuel 3:1-20**

The boy Samuel ministered before the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions. One night Eli, whose eyes were becoming so weak that he could barely see, was lying down in his usual place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the house of the LORD, where the ark of God was.

Then the LORD called Samuel. Samuel answered, "Here I am."

And he ran to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." But Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down." So he went and lay down.

Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." "My son," Eli said, "I did not call; go back and lie down."

Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD: The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him.

A third time the LORD called, "Samuel!" And Samuel got up and went to Eli and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli realized that the LORD was calling the boy. So Eli told Samuel, "Go and lie down, and if he calls you, say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening."

And the LORD said to Samuel: "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make the ears of everyone who hears about it tingle. At that time I will carry out against Eli everything I spoke against his family--from beginning to end. For I told him that I would judge his family forever because of the sin he knew about; his sons blasphemed God, and he failed to restrain them. Therefore I swore to the house of Eli, 'The guilt of Eli's house will never be atoned for by sacrifice or offering.'"

Samuel lay down until morning and then opened the doors of the house of the LORD. He was afraid to tell Eli the vision, but Eli called him and said, "Samuel, my son." Samuel answered, "Here I am." "What was it he said to you?" Eli asked. "Do not hide it from me. May God deal with you, be it ever so severely, if you hide from me anything he told you."

So Samuel told him everything, hiding nothing from him. Then Eli said, "He is the LORD; let him do what is good in his eyes." The LORD was with Samuel as he

grew up, and he let none of Samuel's words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD.

#### ❖ **John 1:43-51**

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote--Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip.

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel."

Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that." He then added, "Very truly I tell you, you will see 'heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on' the Son of Man."

#### ❖ **Address**

Two-level conversations, where the surface conversation masks something deeper and more meaningful, are a common feature of John's gospel. We can generally tell these conversations because there are changes in tone that just don't make sense in a normal conversation. In the call of Nathanael, we have such a conversation. Nathanael seems to go from outright scepticism to a declaration of faith in Jesus as the Son of God in such an abrupt fashion that it indicates to us that something else is going on here. And something is – this passage is not simply one about the calling of Jesus's disciples. In fact, it's hardly about the calling of the disciples at all. The other Gospels relate that Jesus at the beginning of his ministry called twelve disciples to himself. But in the lists of those disciples there is no Nathanael. Two of his disciples – Andrew and Simon – left John the Baptist to go and follow Jesus. But in this passage Simon has changed his name to Peter. Now Simon is a Jewish name and Peter a Greek name. What is more to the point Jesus now calls Philip, which is also a Greek name. Philip came from Bethsaida, which is in the Greek speaking area to the east of the sea of Galilee. Was Philip, a Greek from a Greek area, a practising Jew? Well it seems so. He was familiar with the Old Testament as he told Nathanael that they had found the one of whom Moses had spoken. However, when Philip tells Nathanael where this Messiah is from he is openly sceptical – Nazareth is a little hick town in the back of beyond, and he doubts that anything good can come from there. He then interacts with Jesus in a two-level conversation. Jesus tells him that he has seen him before Philip spoke to him. This isn't simply an observation – Jesus is returning to Galilee, so it's difficult to under-

stand when he would have seen Nathanael. Instead it indicates to Nathanael that Jesus has had the inward sight that comes from God over all things. He has pre-knowledge of him. This causes Nathanael to exclaim that he has met God. Jesus then responds to him by referring to angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. This has a clear reference to Jacob meeting God at Bethel when he fought with God and saw a ladder with angels ascending and descending to heaven. This reference is reinforced when Jesus speaks of Nathanael as being a real Israelite because there is no guile in him. In the story of the meeting with God at Bethel Jacob, fleeing for his life, is very much a man of guile and deceit. Here is Jesus effectively proclaiming that Nathanael's experience of meeting him is parallel to that of Jacob meeting God at Bethel. At that meeting God gave Jacob the name of Israel and established with him the covenant that came from Abraham and Isaac. It is the foundation of God's covenant with the people of Israel. God was and is doing something new. At Bethel God's covenant was with Jacob and his descendants, the people of Israel, and delivered through the land that God promised them. Now the new start sees angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man. No longer is the future salvation to be defined by a People and a land, instead it is to be found in a relationship with Jesus as the Son of God. So, this passage is more about God's new start in Jesus' ministry than it is about the calling of the disciples. When we preachers use the calling of the disciples simply to ask us all to reflect on our own calling, we are missing the point. We are looking at the surface level of the conversation and not to its deeper meaning.

If preachers sometimes have the tendency to miss the point when discussing the call of the disciples in John, there is also the tendency to do so when discussing God's call of Samuel. It is in some senses a charming little story – the little boy trotting off to see Eli on three occasions when he hears a call in the night. It's the kind of thing to use for a children's address, concluding that God can call even little children and asking the youngsters whether if they hear God's call they would respond like Samuel and do what God asked of them, but also reflecting on the fact that it took the older and wiser Eli to guide them to know God – so best listen to your Sunday school teacher!

Alas, the story has rather more unchildlike elements. It set at the time when the twelve tribes were trying to govern themselves in a federal arrangement, with occasional appeals to charismatic leaders – the Judges – to settle disputes and keep them on the right track. But we're told that things are not going well. Instead everybody does what is right in their own eyes – the situation is close to anarchy. And things are not going well in a religious level either. We are told that the lamp – which God had commanded to be kept continuously lit in the Tent of Meeting – was not out – yet – but it was fading fast. Revelations from God which had sustained the people were now very few. The people were losing their way, they were not being properly led politically or religiously. Eli has fallen down on the job. His two sons have taken to abusing their religious authority even to the extent of consorting with prostitutes before the Tent of Meeting. This is not merely a moral failing it also indicates their closer association with the Canaanite fertility religion to which the use of such prostitutes was endemic. Eli has done nothing to rebuke his sons or set them on the right track. Indeed, in this passage we find that Eli is so deaf to the word of God that Samuel must repeat that he has been called three times before Eli twigs that it might be God speaking to the lad. And when Samuel does respond to God, God tells him that he is going to do a new thing. Indeed, he is going to do something so dramatically different that it will "set their ears tingling". Eli's response to all this is to shrug his shoulders when he is told that God will exact retribution on him and his family for their failure to uphold what God had commanded.

Yet even though God sets out to do a new thing, the people still managed to mess it up. God was looking to lead his people, instead they clamour for a King so that they can be like every other one of their neighbouring nations. Samuel tries to warn them off as God's prophet, but they don't listen to him and Samuel is obliged to anoint a king – Saul. It doesn't work out too well, there is violence within the kingly family and dissension, and subsequently the people of Israel split into a northern kingdom and the southern kingdom and the pattern of kingly rule is one of occasional obedience to the will of God and more often than not disobedience and self-reliance rather than faith in God to lead them. So here to we have a story of God making a new start but one that does not lead to success – and God must make another new start in the person of Jesus Christ shifting the focus of salvation from a people and the land to a person and our relationship with him.

Last week Chris talked about how we made new starts ourselves, following on from the covenant service of the previous week. So this week we are looking at the way God can make new starts for us to meet current circumstances. In “Morality”, the last book he wrote before his death, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggested that stable societies – particularly Western societies – were based on three interlocking “pillars”. The first of these was an economic system that acted for the benefit of all and not just a few, and which gave fair and equitable rewards. The second was a political system which gave people a proper choice between alternatives; which allows the transfer of power without violence; and in which the principles of justice and the rule of law are paramount. The third was the acceptance of a common morality – a view of what was right and wrong, what was just and unjust, what was acceptable behaviour and unacceptable behaviour. In his view all three pillars in modern society were failing or had failed. Much has been written about the failures of the economic system that has been predominant since the early 1980s – a low regulation, open, free market system, from commentators like Wilson and Pickett, Thomas Piketty, and Joseph Stiglitz amongst others. Equally, the trials and tribulations of modern democracy have been analysed by people like Frances Fukuyama, Timothy Snyder, and a host of commentators about the contemporary political situation in various countries. We don't have time to look at these areas today.

What Rabbi Sacks was interested in was what he saw as the failure of morality, which he attributed to three principal things. The first was the replacement of “we” by “I” in our collective discourse. Individual wishes and needs were now paramount, and the idea, in Western societies, that these might be subordinate to community pressures had been diminished. Not lost, but significantly lessened. The second was that the Anglo-American understanding of human rights – that there were certain inalienable rights that we possessed which needed to be safeguarded against an excess of executive power – had given way to the understanding of rights based on the model of the French Revolution – that each of us had certain rights which we could expect the state to meet as a key obligation. It was this French/continental view that underpinned the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The third problem of collective morality was the growth of relativism which replaced a common understanding of what was and what was not morally acceptable with a view that held that all beliefs and behaviours were equally acceptable, always providing they did not impinge upon the welfare of others. The expectation was that each group would tolerate the other and celebrate diversity, but in practice indifference was often substituted for tolerance and the contrasting attitudes of different groups has led to unresolvable conflict.

The problems these pressures created in the weakening of a common morality had

much wider consequences. Secular relativism undermined and weakened the resolve of people of faith and had led to a backlash in the face of the uncertainty that it presented, with minority groups within all faiths becoming more literal, more fundamentalist, and more aggressive in defence of their religious tradition and inheritance. This affected not only the faiths of the book – Christianity, Judaism, Islam – but also other faiths such as Hinduism or Buddhism. This relativism, coupled with the French conception of human rights impose intolerable burdens on democratic governments who could not possibly meet the contrary and sometimes contradictory demands of different groups, all of which expected respect for their individual position and support from governments. The pressure this created on democratic systems was often resolved by extremist parties and populist politicians who offered simplistic solutions to dilemmas that they could not possibly deliver. While some of the extremist factions of religious faiths have supported the demagogues, mainstream Churches have often flailed about making little impact in the public debate on morality. Part of this is because our traditions have left a legacy that makes our message of the coming of the kingdom less likely to be received.

In his book, Rabbi Sacks tells a story taken from the Jewish tradition:

“An old man and a young man are together on a train that is speeding towards its final destination, the hometown of the old man. The young man, seeing that they are approaching their destination, asks the older man if he can tell him the time. The old man does not reply. Thinking that possibly he is a little deaf the young man repeats his question but speaks a little louder and a little more slowly. The old man continues to ignore him. The young man is sure that the older man has heard him so he asks “Excuse me sir, but I’ve asked you twice if you could tell me the time and I’m sure that you’ve heard me, but you have ignored me. Why is that?”

The old man looks at the young man and replies “Young man, if I answer your question I will establish a relationship with you. The train is nearly at the final destination and you are a stranger. Under the tradition of our faith I will feel obliged to offer you hospitality. You are a handsome young man, and I have a beautiful daughter. You will meet, you will be attracted to each other, you will fall in love, and you will want to marry. So I must ask myself, do I want as a son-in-law a man who can’t afford a watch!”

Rabbi Sacks uses this story to illustrate two points, the difference of perspective from the old man and the young man – the young man is looking to the immediate situation, the old man is looking long-term; and the fact that the old man knows that small decisions taken in the short term can have long-term consequences.

There have been two situations in the Church’s history which have led to short-term decisions which have had very long-term consequences – the relationship of Church and state, and answering the question “why did Christ have to die”?

The earliest Christian Church had an ambivalent relationship with the Roman Empire. It represented no threat initially but was later persecuted. But in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. the Roman Empire faced a crisis which it solved by entering a symbiotic relationship with the Christian Church. The Church gained the protection of the State and official recognition which enabled it to grow and develop and become very wealthy; the Roman Empire, now unable to look after its peoples, gained an international organisation which was largely non-political and nonthreatening which provided welfare and moral and spiritual justification for its activities. But this joining together very much

changed the thinking of the Christian Church. From being initially a non-violent faith, proclaiming equality and tolerating diversity, it became one linked to the hierarchy of society and keen to define its beliefs. But this also defined heresy and with heresy measures to ensure that people did not develop independent thinking. With the relationship came theologies about a just war, reflecting the fact that the State retains the right of violence to maintain its integrity. The linkage of Church and State together created tensions about who would be master over issues of moral and political leadership. It was resolved in the 12th century into an understanding that the Christian Church took the lead in moral and spiritual matters, whilst the State took the lead in political, military, and matters of justice and law. But there was always a tendency of the one to corrupt the other and in the mid-16th century the abuse of the Church's position and its accretion of wealth was one of the sparks that gave rise to the Reformation. The Reformation brought change – a new start – when Christians concentrated more on the Bible and Scripture, and less on the traditions and rituals of the late mediaeval Church. Luther solved the problem of Church and State's interaction and the violence both community and personal that this created with his "two kingdoms" thinking – a separation of the political realm from that of the religious realm.

The question "why did Jesus have to die" lies at the heart of the Christian message of resurrection and salvation. In the earliest days of the Church the answer to that question would have involved a corrupted priestly leadership of the Jewish people conspiring with the Imperial Roman state that feared popular uprisings, particularly from within the Jewish community with which it had such an uneasy relationship. However, as Church and state came together this was a "sensitive" issue. Theological thinking developed the idea that Jesus died to pay off the Devil who was the instigator of the sins of the people, and that God double-crossed him at the resurrection! But in the 12th century, when the relationship of Church and state was being sorted out, St Anselm became concerned that this seemed to give the Devil an equal status with God – which was unacceptable. So he developed thinking from his experience of the mediaeval feudal system which held that individuals own an obligation to God, rather as a peasant owed an obligation to the Lord of the Manor, but one that could never be repaid. Jesus was the means by which the justice of God could be fulfilled by the death of his own Son to "pay for our sins". And this theory of the atonement stuck. But it carries with it a heavy burden of difficult unanswered questions – what kind of father would wish the death of his son? Wasn't this view of God one of vengeance rather than mercy and love? Wasn't it all too contractual, too covenantal, too much like the old covenant of land and people and not enough like the new relationship of sons and daughters that Jesus promised? It was an explanation which suggested that to accept your lot in society, and to put up with injustice and suffering was somehow worthy, and an emulation of Christ. As such it has been used to justify discrimination and oppression, and even slavery, as well as suggesting that the hierarchy of the secular state was in some way God given. And finally, St Anselm's explanation of why Jesus had to die suggested that our response to his act was at the same time both gratitude for his sacrifice, but also guilt that our sin had placed him on the cross.

These two short-term responses, conditioned by the environment of the time, have had long-term repercussions within our own society. The fraught relationship of Church and State continues. For some Churches, like the Anglican Church, it is a much more pressing issue as it is for the Lutheran Church in Germany, particularly following its support for the Nazi state, and likewise the Roman Catholic Church in countries where that is dominant. Alas, the impact of two world wars in the 20th century greatly undermined the authority of the Christian Church that was seen to be allied to the State, and

the subsequent oppression of people on the grounds of race, colour, or gender is often been seen to be aided and abetted by a Church that is too strongly associated with a State which is hierarchical, unequal, and elitist. There has been a search for a return to an earlier view of Jesus' death upon the Cross, in which God does not demand that Jesus dies, and we are not the beneficiaries of Jesus's death to excuse our sins. Instead Jesus died because of the evil of a collective humanity, and it was not the will of God that he should die. This is heavy stuff, but we must get to grips with it because the traditional Christian response of guilt towards Jesus Christ for saving us from our sins makes increasingly little sense to a world which no longer feels a sense of sin. Instead the moral relativism of our time accepts a wide range of diversity amongst peoples that would be unacceptable – indeed treated as heresy – in the period that immediately followed the Reformation when these doctrines became fixed. Perhaps now is an opportunity for a new start and new thinking.

So, here are two thinking points that might suggest that we should look to making a new start in the way that the Church relates to our modern world with its rampant secularism, moral relativism, and fear of uncertainty. Doing so will often be uncomfortable and will challenge some of our traditional practices and doctrines. God may be calling us to make that new start, as he called Samuel, if we would but listen. That new start may make our ears tingle and stun others. But perhaps if we don't hear the call then we will like Eli seeing out our term of office without assuring our succession

#### ❖ Prayer/Meditation

O Lord our God,  
teach our hearts this day  
where and how to see you,  
where and how to find you.  
You have made and remade us,  
and you have given to us  
all the truly good things we possess,  
and still we do not know you.  
We have not yet done that for which we were created.

Teach us to seek you,  
for we cannot seek you unless you teach us,  
or find you unless you show yourself to us.  
Let us seek you in our longing,  
let us long for you in our seeking.  
Let us find you by loving you,  
let us love you when we find you. **Amen.**

❖ **Hymn StF 662 Have you heard God's voice: has your heart been stirred?**

Have you heard God's voice;  
has your heart been stirred?  
Are you still prepared to follow?  
Have you made a choice to remain and serve,  
though the way be rough and narrow?

*Will you walk the path that will cost you much  
and embrace the pain and sorrow?*

*Will you trust in One who entrusts to you  
the disciples of tomorrow?*

Will you use your voice; will you not sit down  
when the multitudes are silent?  
Will you make a choice to stand your ground  
when the crowds are turning violent?

In your city streets will you be God's heart?  
Will you listen to the voiceless?  
Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,  
will you share your faith with the faithless?

Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith  
and believe it could be different?  
Will you share your views using words of grace?  
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?

*We will walk the path that will cost us much  
and embrace the pain and sorrow.  
We will trust in One who entrusts to us  
the disciples of tomorrow.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1Ajgbqg9eU>

❖ **Prayer of Intercession**

Let us pray to God,  
who knows us better than we know ourselves,  
and understands our world.

Lord, we know we are called to be the Body of Christ;  
make us worthy of that calling,  
fervent in all our prayer and worship, loving,  
faithful and honest in our lives,  
so that the whole Church displays what God is like.

*Silence*

Draw us closer:  
**closer to the heart of God.**

We pray for the grace and wisdom  
to care for this world we have been given as our home;  
for perception in the difficult decisions,  
and commitment to justice and peace.

*Silence*

Draw us closer:  
**closer to the heart of God.**

We pray for the homes of this village,  
whose hopes and struggles, sorrows and fears  
are already known to you.  
May each household be blessed as we pray,  
and may your love fill each life.

*Silence*

Draw us closer:  
**closer to the heart of God.**

We pray for all who do not yet know you,  
and all whose hearts are poisoned with hate  
or weighed down with despair.  
May your light scatter their darkness  
and bring them hope and healing.

*Silence*

Draw us closer:  
**closer to the heart of God.**

We pray for those who have died to this life  
and are born into your heaven;  
comfort those who miss their physical presence,  
and bring us all to share in the fullness of your life.

*Silence*

Draw us closer:  
**closer to the heart of God.**

We give you thanks for all that points us  
towards the beauty of your love,  
and draws us closer to you.

Merciful Father,  
accept these prayers  
for the sake of your Son,  
our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

❖ **Lord's Prayer**

We say together the prayer that Jesus gave us:

**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 673 Will you come and follow me?**

Will you come and follow me  
if I but call your name?  
Will you go where you don't know  
and never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,  
will you let my name be known,  
will you let my life be grown,  
in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind  
if I but call your name?  
Will you care for cruel and kind  
and never be the same?  
Will you risk the hostile stare  
should your life attract or scare?  
Will you let me answer prayer  
in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see  
if I but call your name?  
Will you set the prisoners free  
and never be the same?  
Will you kiss the leper clean,  
and do such as this unseen,  
and admit to what I mean  
in you and you in me?

Will you love the 'you' you hide  
if I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside  
and never be the same?  
Will you use the faith you've found  
to reshape the world around,  
through my sight and touch and sound  
in you and you in me?

Lord, your summons echoes true  
when you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you  
and never be the same.  
In your company I'll go  
where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus I'll move and live and grow  
in you and you in me.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o469PRLdbHU>

❖ **Blessing**

God the Father, bless us;  
Jesus Christ, take care of us;  
Holy Spirit, enlighten us all the days of our lives.  
o Lord, be our defender and keeper,  
both now and for ever, through all ages. **Amen.**