

East Leake Methodist Church

24 January 2021

“Get ready”/Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

Praise the Lord!

How good it is to sing praises to our God,

How pleasant and fitting to praise him! Psalm 47 v1

**StF 53: How shall I sing that majesty
which angels do admire?**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOl-YWWpEXk>

This week is the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This year the service has been prepared by a community of French speaking nuns living in the monastic community of Grandchamp in Switzerland. Their traditions of worship are different from ours, so in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity it seems appropriate to use something of the material that they have prepared. Our opening prayers are taken from their service.

Opening Prayers

Both You who call us to be praise: glory to you!

Reader 1 We sing your praise in the midst of the world and among all peoples,

Reader 2 We sing your praise in the midst of creation and among all creatures.

Both You who call us to be praise: glory to you!

Reader 1 We sing your praise among suffering and tears,

Reader 2 We sing your praise among promises and achievements.

Both You who call us to be praise: glory to you!

Reader 1 We sing your praise in the places of conflict and misunderstanding;

Reader 2 We sing your praise in the places of encounter and reconciliation.

Both You who call us to be praise: glory to you!

Reader 1 We sing your praise in the midst of rifts and divisions,

Reader 2 We sing your praise in the midst of life and death, the birth of a new heaven and a new earth.

Both You who call us to be praise: glory to you!

Amen

Prayer of Confession *Please join in with the words in bold*

Lord, when you came into the world, things changed.

When we came into a relationship with you, things changed. Life became filled with a new sense of purpose and peace.

But, Lord, sometimes we let you down by doing wrong things or failing to do right things.

We are sorry, Lord.

Sometimes, Lord, through pride, stubbornness or fear we build barriers and keep others at arm's length – even you, Lord.

We are sorry, Lord.

At times we give in to our weaknesses and temptations, failing to draw on your strength. At times we are troubled by difficult situations and find it hard to trust you.

We are sorry, Lord.

Help us to turn such things around and turn to you. Help us to learn from the past and, drawing on your strength and peace, make a better future.

Amen.

Assurance of forgiveness

O God, when Jesus was baptized, you spoke of your love for him. You showed your love for us through Jesus' death and resurrection. By the power of the cross, the darkness of our wrongdoing is banished by the light of your loving forgiveness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The theme of our readings and of my address is "Get ready". Our first reading is about God calling Abram, who was later called Abraham. Our second reading is a story about Paul and Silas on their missionary journey round Greece. They had reached the city of Philippi and had started to preach there.

Readings: Genesis 12. 1-4 God calls Abram
Acts 16. 22-36 Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi

**StF 338: There is a Redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Sub7_nnDv4

Address

My address is in three parts. First I will talk about what is happening today. Next I will talk about our first reading, the Old Testament one from Genesis. Lastly I will talk about our New Testament reading from the Book of Acts.

First, then, what is happening today.

Recently I read this quotation:

"I am too ready to get on with life and [to] lose sight of God. [I am too ready] simply to accept things for how they are, rather than ask God how I am to respond to the times in which I live"

These words were written before covid 19 began to affect this country. When I read them last week they spoke to me. I realised that I had been passively reacting to the many changes that covid has brought, rather than asking God how I am to respond to this crisis.

I have found it a real struggle to cope with all the changes and fluctuations in our national fortunes. We all know how the virus has waxed and then waned then spread more quickly than ever before. At times our country seems to getting some sort of control over the virus. But then our hopes are dashed again as another problem appears. For example, our church building was closed in March in Lockdown 1, reopened in September, closed again in November in Lockdown 2, reopened in December and is now closed again for Lockdown 3. Visits to friends and family have become rare and treasured times, instead of part of life.

So dealing with all of this has taken up a lot of my energy, and I feel tired. Perhaps you do too. But this quotation challenged me. Have I been too ready to accept the changes that covid has brought, without asking what God has to teach us in this crisis? As soon as I asked myself this question, I felt sure that God does have some teaching for us now.

What is that teaching? I wish that I could give you a full list, but I can't. Perhaps the best thing that I can do this morning is to plant that question in your minds. What is God trying to tell us to help us cope with, and learn from, this emergency?

We can't hear what God is saying unless we decide to listen. May I suggest that in your prayers this week you ask God that question?

To ask the question implies that we believe that God is here with us in the crisis. One of the strange aspects of this crisis has been how little discussion there has been about how God can help our country at this time. The churches in general, and other faiths too, seem to have little to say. I read a daily paper and there has been almost no mention of churches at all. I haven't seen any message from the churches to the nation.

Do we Christians have nothing to say? Are we as overwhelmed as everyone else? Is our faith in an Almighty God on the sidelines? Are we just withdrawing into our shells, sitting at home and being fearful of what will happen next?

I feel that one thing that God is saying to our churches is: get ready for change. At present our country is changing rapidly. I think that it is becoming increasingly obvious that some of the changes that covid has brought won't be temporary, they will be permanent. An example is the decline of shops in big cities. Another is the growth in working at home. In both cases these changes were starting to happen before covid appeared, but covid has greatly speeded up their impact. We can't expect our churches to be immune from the winds of change that are blowing through our lives.

This morning we are meeting on zoom or by email. It is obvious from what we are doing today that one of the changes that we will see will be that our churches will be making much greater use of the wonders of technology than we have ever done before. Services on zoom, and church meetings on zoom, will continue. Facebook, such as the circuit is using for the Twelfth Church, won't go away. We won't forget the techniques that covid has prompted us to learn.

So let us be thankful to God that the virus arrived here at a time when personal computers and smart phones were widely owned and understood. Even ten years ago we wouldn't have been as nearly as well equipped as we are now.

Of course, the danger of change is that some people get left behind. We don't want to exclude anybody. We must make sure that what is produced through the medium of new technology can be shared by everyone. Not everyone in church needs to understand how these devices work, but I'm sure that you will agree with me that it is truly important that everyone gets an equal chance to take part.

So today we are holding our service on zoom. But we have also sent it out on email and put it on our website so it can be accessed in other ways.

So expect change. Be ready for it. Don't see it as a threat, something that the terrible virus has inflicted on us. I would urge you to see it as God's continuing work in His world: a world that has always been changing.

Of course change involves uncertainty, it involves risk. Now I'm going on to talk about our first reading, from the Book of Genesis. That is a reading about change.

In our reading we heard how Abram, later called Abraham, one of the founder figures of our faith, was faced by God with change. God called Abram to leave the city where he was living. He was called to leave his family and his present way of life. He was called to go to a country that he didn't know.

How long ago did that happen? There are no dates in that part of the Bible, because it happened in the days when the very first methods of recording time were being invented. It was at least 2,000 years before Christ came, over 4,000 years from today. Already, over 4,000 years ago, we see God leading His people through change.

God said to Abram

"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you".

So I like to imagine what was the reaction of Sarah, Abram's wife, when he told her this. May I portray it like this?

Abram Wonderful news. God has spoken to me

Sarah Praise God. What did He say?

Abram He told me that we should leave here and go and live where He will show us

Sarah Great! So where are we going to?

Abram I don't know.

Sarah Is it quite near?

Abram I don't know. God will tell us that it is the right place when we get there.

Sarah How will we earn our living?

Abram I don't know

Sarah Husband, are you *sure* that it was God who spoke to you?

As we all know, God did lead Abram and Sarah to the land that became Israel. God did keep them safe on the way and God did provide a living for them there. With hindsight we know it. It can't have felt like that when they began their journey.

So, get ready for change. Believe that God is leading us to a new and better place, just as He did for Abram and Sarah.

Finally I want to turn to the third part of my address, and talk about our new Testament reading. There we heard about Paul and Silas, who were travelling round Greece preaching the gospel. They were in Philippi, and already some people had begun to believe in Jesus as Lord. However, as happened so often to St Paul, success in preaching the gospel led to opposition, violent opposition. They were attacked, and although it was Paul and Silas who were the victims, it was Paul and Silas who got thrown into prison.

It is an inspiring story. Today I'm going to speak about just one verse, verse 25.

"Paul and Silas [were in prison and] were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them."

Paul and Silas were in prison. Why have I chosen this verse? I think that you are all ahead of me here. They were in prison, we are in lockdown. Obviously prison is far worse than lockdown, but there are similarities. What did Paul and Silas do while they were in prison? They had been badly beaten, they were hurting, and – they were praying and singing hymns to God.

They were in prison, they were waiting to see how the magistrates would punish them the next day, and while they waited, they were praying and singing hymns to God. So while we wait for the vaccines to come, let us do the same – pray and sing hymns. Let us draw on our rich musical heritage.

Do you know any hymns by heart? Sing them while you do the washing up. Do you have a recording of the Messiah, or of a cathedral choir? Get it out and play it and have an inspiring evening. Look on the internet. There are many fine Christian recordings available without payment. All you have to do is to type the first line of a hymn or song into Google or your internet search engine, and several versions of the music will come up. Explore the Christian music that is being written now, in the UK and all over the world.

Let me now draw my address to a close. Today, on the surface, it seems that the churches are being marginalised by this pandemic. Our buildings are closed. Activities dear to us and to other people have stopped – our coffee mornings for example.

Our buildings are closed: the church continues. Let us ask God what he is teaching us through this crisis: ask and listen for his reply. We have already learned a lot about using technology so that we can continue to meet during lockdown. Be ready for further change: be ready to learn more.

Lastly while we wait, pray and sing hymns to God. We will do that now.

**StF 333: Majesty, worship his majesty;
unto Jesus be glory, honour and praise.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaRwD2Y7C0s>

Prayers of Intercession

Eternal God, it feels as if the whole world has changed and yet in you there is stability and the opportunity of a new beginning. So, we pray now for those whose lives are in turmoil, those whose lives have been turned upside down, those who feel lost.

May they feel supported and find fresh hope in You.

We pray for those for whom the lockdown has come as a relief, for those who now feel safer. But we pray too for those who now feel desperate, alone and worried about their finances or their mental health.

May they feel supported and find fresh hope in You.

We pray for children and young adults as their schooling is disrupted. We pray for those who enjoy learning from home. But pray too for those who miss their friends. We remember their parents and the parents of children with special needs, struggling to cope on their own. We pray for their teachers and administrative staff.

May they feel supported and find fresh hope in You.

We pray for the people of a divided America at this time of tension and conflict. We pray for our own Government, the health service and for all who work to care for us.

May they feel supported and find fresh hope in You.

We pray for one another, our families, our communities, our church fellowships. May we bring fresh hope to those who feel forgotten and are vulnerable. And may we – practically and prayerfully – share our faith in your Son Jesus in whose name we entrust these prayers to you.

Amen

*Let us join together in the prayer which our Lord taught us- **Our Father.....***

**StF 409: Let us build a house where love can dwell
and all can safely live,**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZOnxQXU2qc>

Let us share in the Grace

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all, evermore. Amen