

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 22:23-4

You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honour him!
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.

Hymn STF 326 Jesus comes with all his grace (Orientis Partibus)

Jesus comes with all his grace,
comes to save a fallen race:
object of our glorious hope,
Jesus comes to lift us up.

Let the living stones cry out;
let the seed of Abram shout;
praise we all our lowly King,
give him thanks, rejoice, and sing.

He has our salvation wrought,
he our captive souls has bought,
he has reconciled to God,
he has washed us in his blood.

We are now his lawful right,
walk as children of the light;
we shall soon obtain the grace,
pure in heart, to see his face.

We shall gain our calling's prize;
after God we all shall rise,
filled with joy, and love, and peace,
perfected in holiness.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Onm4k4v-eD8>

Opening Prayers

Jesus, you are the glory of eternity shining now among us,
the tenderness of God here with us now.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Jesus, you are the Healing Person,
the pattern of goodness,
the fulfilment of the highest human hopes.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Jesus, you are the champion of the weak,
the counsellor of the despairing,
the brother of us all.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Jesus, you are the splendour of the Father,
the Son of Mary,
our Bridge between heaven and Earth.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Jesus, you are the source of life, the goal of the universe,
the people's friend, the world-pervading God.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Jesus, you are one of the human family,
Joy of Angels, Prince of Peace.

God who is with us, we adore you.

Amen.

Most merciful God, we confess to you
before the company of heaven and one another
that we have sinned in thought, word and deed
and in what we have failed to do.

Forgive us our sins,
heal us by your Spirit
and raise us to new life in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

God of the fray, God of the bumps,
cool us down, because we are frayed.

Lift us up,
because we have come down with a bump.
Help us to accept the duties that confront us.

Help us to assimilate
the experiences that have enriched us
and to become aware of your presence,
now in the present moment. **Amen.**

Readings

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.

God also said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."

Romans 4:13-25

It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed--the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Mark 8:31-38

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

Hymn StF 463 Deep in the shadows of the past

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fBnZ0C8Tj4>

Address

Chatting.

Over the last several weeks in our Four Square group, Tuesday Chat, and services we've been talking about the new publication "The Methodist Way of Life" and some of the challenges that it presents to us. I think we concluded early on that although it speaks about the Methodist way of life, in fact it is a pretty good summary for most Christians, and although we generally felt happy with what it was saying, the biggest challenge seemed to be how we talked about Jesus to other people. We have had several goes at this. John Pugh reminded us that we don't have to be paid-up theologians to want to discuss Jesus with other people – our own personal experience was what mattered. In fact, using heavy theological language like "the soteriological imperative of the Passion" is likely put most people off! Certainly, that was one of the points I tried to get across in my last sermon when I talked about how, in a time of declining public morality, some of the theorising and language of the Church no longer seemed relevant and since the Church had changed its thinking in the past in response to changing political and social environments so perhaps, we needed to change ourselves. But still, in our conversations, that key question remains "why do we find it so difficult to talk about Jesus to others?" Is it embarrassment, is it fear of saying something wrong, is it the fear that we will be laughed at, is the fear that we would face hostility? I still think we have still got some way to go in our conversation. Maggie reminded us that Taizé has attracted such a large following not because they did anything special, but because they were who they were, and people found the spiritual life that they led attractive. And the Christian demands for love and peace in a world

dominated by violence and hostility was not an easy one as our recent discussions showed, though it did mark Christians out as being different from others. So perhaps being the Church is as important as doing – we are human beings and not human doings. But even so, we still find it difficult to share our experiences of Jesus with others.

I start with this because Mark 8:38 says:

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

That seems to suggest that if we fail to speak up for Jesus to others, Jesus will not speak up for us. So speaking about Jesus becomes something of a "must do" for us.

What messiah?

It's not wise to take a single verse out of context. So it helps if we unpick the meaning of this passage a little. The central focus is the Messiah in first century Jewish thought. In the passage that immediately precedes our gospel reading Jesus is on the way to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. He is taking some time out and travelling from the Jewish part of Galilee to the Greek speaking part where he will be less harassed by the crowds. On the way he asked them the key question "Who do people say that I am?" The answers he gets from Peter illustrate contemporary thought about the Messiah. The idea of the Messiah grew out of the unfulfilled prophetic expectations the Jewish people received around the time of their Exile. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets had promised them that God would restore them and would fulfil his earlier promises. Those promises, as I described when I looked at the call of Nathaniel a few weeks ago, were based on two ideas – that the Jews would be God's chosen people, and that God would give them a Promised Land. The special people and the special land covenant that God had with his people was changed when Jesus proclaimed that he now was the fulfilment of God's promise, and that a relationship with him and, through him, reconciliation with the Father, was the new thing that God had done. As we saw from our Old Testament reading the "special people and land" promises of God went way back. Abram and Sarai are promised that their children will become a great nation, even though both are beyond the age where they could expect to have children. God will accomplish this. The Jewish people felt this promise renewed when God brought them out of captivity in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. But the Exile was a terrible shock. Both their special relationship and their land had been lost. Yet the promise of renewal was there. It wasn't achieved in the period after the Exile though. The Jews had remained subservient to great empires and they looked to a Messiah who would deliver them. That Messiah would be prophet, priest, and king. He would be a prophet, because prophetic visions had ceased in Israel and as Proverbs has it "where there is no vision the people perish". The situation was very much as it had been in the time of Eli and his sons at the time of Samuel. The Messiah as prophet would bring a restoration of a future vision of God's kingdom for the people. He would also be a priest, because the priesthood had become debased – as in the time of Eli – and had been sold to the highest bidder, who retained their religious authority only by cooperation with the hated Romans. The Messiah would be a king, because under King Herod the Jewish people's independence had been betrayed to the Romans so that Herod and his dysfunctional family could retain political power.

So when Peter says that some people consider Jesus to be Elijah – the prophet who was taken up into heaven by God and was expected to return in the time of the Messiah – or a

prophet he is simply reflecting a common understanding of the time about the Messiah. When Jesus asked the disciples directly “But who do **you** say that I am?” Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah. Then Jesus goes on to tell them that the Messiah will suffer and be killed by the religious authorities – the priests and teachers of the law – but will rise again. This is not what Peter, and the disciples, expect to hear. It goes directly against their understanding of the power of the Messiah and the unfulfilled promises. They cannot accept it. When Peter tells Jesus so, Jesus rebuked him for failing to understand that in Jesus God has done a new thing and has moved beyond the old promises of a special people and promised land into a new relationship.

A continuing misunderstanding

Peter’s misunderstanding continued into the life of the Early Church. Peter’s earlier sermons, recorded in Acts, present Jesus as the fulfilment of the earlier prophecies. The first church was a Jewish sect. It is only after the incident in the house of Cornelius the Centurion, when the Holy Spirit comes upon the Gentiles, that Peter begins to understand that something greater has happened here. He persuaded the other disciples that the evidence of the Holy Spirit meant a wider inclusiveness that moved beyond God’s special people as being the Jews alone, to encompass now all believers, Jew and Gentile. But then a difference of opinion grew as to whether these new Gentile converts were expected to follow the Jewish Law which had been a key feature of the older “special people and promised land” covenant. Paul, as a disciple to the Gentiles did not accept that they had to follow Jewish Law. In his journeys and preaching he was constantly plagued by Jewish Christians who attempted to reverse his understanding. The disagreement raged in the Early Church to the extent that Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome were banished from the city by Claudius because their disagreements caused public disturbances – a situation which the Roman authorities would not tolerate. Only when Nero came to power were they reinstated. When Paul wrote his letter to the Romans it was shortly after this reinstatement. It is not an easy letter to read, especially during worship. It is densely argued with complex sentences. But what Paul is essentially trying to say to the Christians in Rome is to explain the relationship between the old covenant – special people and promised land – and the new relationship in Jesus Christ. It wasn’t that the old covenant was wrong, it was appropriate for its time, but it did not bring reconciliation to God. The Jewish law simply defined what was and what was not sinful. The new relationship through Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection superseded the old arrangement.

To demonstrate this Paul refers to the covenantal relationship that existed before the law of Moses and the promises of God to Moses that became integral to the understanding of the Jewish people. He goes back to the covenant relationship that God had with Abraham and the patriarchs. The essence of that relationship, Paul says, is faith. Abraham and Sarai could not reasonably have expected that God’s promises would be fulfilled, but they had faith – especially Abraham. Sarai for her part found it difficult to believe that she would have children. When Abraham met God at the Oaks of Mamre Sarah was hiding behind the tent door and heard God’s promise that by this time next year she would have a son. “I should be so lucky” she must’ve thought and laughed. As Alan Dale puts it in his modern language Old Testament stories “Winding Quest” God heard Sarah laugh. “Why did Sarah laugh?” said God. “I didn’t laugh”, said Sarah. “Yes, you did”, says God. Ultimately it was faith that made Abraham right with God. To use the old language “it was counted to him as righteousness”. And it was faith in Jesus Christ, Paul says, that will make us righteous in God’s eyes.

Issues in the new relationship.

Even later, after the time of the apostles, when the Gospels were being written difficulties with understanding the relationship with Jesus seem to exist. Because after the exchange with the disciples, the gospel story takes a sudden sideways leap, so to speak. We move from a private discussion with the disciples during an “time out” session with Jesus, to Jesus talking to a crowd. Mark uses language that is anachronistic – out of its time. Before the events of Easter telling the crowd of followers that they would have to “take up their cross” does not make a lot of sense. It does make sense in the light of the early life of the Church struggling under some of the first persecutions of the Emperor Nero. If you want to keep quiet about your faith in Jesus, then you will not gain the eternal life promised but will lose it. If you feel ashamed about the criminal execution of your leader – as you might well do in the psyche of the Eastern Mediterranean where Jewish Law condemned the criminal who was executed as an outcast from the “special people”, and the common people would laugh at you for following such a criminal as they saw it – then Jesus would be ashamed of you for not standing up for him in public.

So we come full circle to that key question that would be asking ourselves “why is it so hard, it seems, to speak about Jesus to others?”. But take heart from these passages that we read this morning. It’s not just that you find it difficult to articulate your relationship with Jesus in a meaningful or theological way, the disciples struggled before you to understand the new thing that God had done; the Early Church found it difficult to see the difference between the old covenant relationship and the new relationship with Jesus; and Christians facing persecution and difficulties were hugely tempted to keep their heads down and say nothing about their faith, rather than to profess it and find themselves facing the mockery and criticism of their fellow citizens, and the wrath of the Roman authorities.

Take heart also that the Early Church did grow during this period. It was one of great difficulty – the first century was a time of economic depression; of a collapse in public morality and religion; of a struggle with an authoritarian superpower; and a time of great inequality, slavery, and injustice. In the past I have sometimes used a quotation from Roetzal’s book on the letters of Paul which describes how difficult things were in the first century A.D. With only a few changes of words it very much stands as a contemporary description. And it could be that at this time of great difficulty when we are facing an uncertain future in the light of the current health crisis, and the difficulties in the climate change crisis which is to come, that people, searching for a greater and better meaning in their lives, will see that faith in Christ provides both comfort and a challenge to a better way of living. In the past the Church has seen periods of revival, as well as periods of decline. Perhaps we will be presented with an opportunity in the not-too-distant future.

But how will we rise to the challenge? Perhaps the change from “people and the land” to a relationship gives us a clue. Using our own experience we can simply introduce people to Jesus as a friend. After all, if we had a great friend we would be happy to get them to meet other friends. We don’t have to provide everything that is needed to sustain that friendship in future. It will grow with the individual, or it will not. How it grows with them will be different from the experience that we have had. It may produce some unexpected results. And God will be doing something new, if we make the introduction and then stand back and let it happen.

Now when I came to choose the next hymn, I had a choice to make. Should I go for the old favourite StF 531 What a friend we have in Jesus, or H&P 677 I’m not ashamed to own my

Lord? But I decided that John Bell's newer hymn "The Call" said it best, so that's what we'll hear now.

Hymn StF 673 Will you come and follow me

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eAYM8pWCwWk>

Prayer of Intercession

Summoned by Christ to live his risen life, let us pray in the assurance of faith to our heavenly Father.

We pray that many may be receptive to God's calling and, acknowledging his authority, be prepared to relinquish personal ambitions and plans in submitting their lives to his service.

Silence

Lord of creation:
may your will be done.

We pray that the leaders of the nations may be sensitive to the needs of their people, just and merciful, caring and constructive.

Silence

Lord of creation:
may your will be done.

We pray that all who work to heal, restore movement, hearing, sight or speech, may be blessed as they work in harmony with God; that those they tend may be given courage, patience and wholeness.

Silence

Lord of creation:
may your will be done.

We pray that in every person we meet this week
we may look for the good and be alert to needs;
that we may be ready to serve cheerfully, without grudging,
happy to be serving Christ.

Silence

Lord of creation:
may your will be done.

Now, in the space of silence,
we bring to God our Father our own private prayers.

Silence

Most merciful Father,
we ask you to accept these prayers, through 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 318 Christ, our King before creation (Blaenwern)

Christ, our King before creation,
life, before all life began,
crowned in deep humiliation
by your partners in God's plan,
make us humble in believing,
and, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, forgive our self-deceiving,
come and reign in us today!'

Lord of time and Lord of history,
giving, when the world despairs,
faith to wrestle with the mystery
of a God who loves and cares,
make us humble in believing,
and, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, by grace beyond conceiving,
come and reign in us today!'

Word that ends our long debating,
life of God which sets us free,
through your body recreating
life as life is meant to be,
make us humble in believing,
and, believing, bold to pray:
'Lord, in us your aim achieving,
come and reign in us today!'

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcSqfZtdYd4>

Blessing

Go peaceful
in gentleness
through the violence of these days.
Give freely.

Show tenderness
in all your ways.
Through darkness,
in troubled times
let holiness be your aim.
Seek wisdom.

Let faithfulness
burn like a flame.
God speed you! God lead you,
and keep you wrapped around His heart!
May you be known by love.
Be righteous.

Speak truthfully
in a world of greed and lies.
Show kindness.

See everyone
through heaven's eyes.
God hold you, enfold you,
and keep you wrapped around His heart.
May you be known by love.
Amen.