

Church at Home

East Leake Methodist Church 14 March 2021

"God saves us"

"Give thanks to the Lord, because he is good;
his love is eternal!"

Repeat these words in praise to the Lord,
all you whom he has saved.

He has rescued you from your enemies
and has brought you back from foreign countries,
from east and west, from north and south.

Psalm 107 vv1-3

I've chosen our first hymn because today is Mothering Sunday. The hymn compares God to a mother in the third verse. God is our mother and our father.

**StF 88: Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcClEXG0Z1c>

Prayer of Adoration

O God, maker of all things, lover of all people,
your presence is with us always, around us and within us.
You are the source of our life, and without you, we and all things would cease to be.
You alone are real: everything else derives its reality from you.
Help us to worship you with mind and heart and with all the power of our being;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Father eternal, Giver of light and grace,
We have sinned against you and against our fellow men,
in what we have thought,
in what we have said and done,
through ignorance, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault.
We have wounded your love, and we have marred your image in us.
We are sorry and ashamed, and repent of all our sins.

For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us,
forgive us,
and lead us from darkness to walk as children of light. **Amen**

Our readings begin in the Old Testament with a story from when the people of Israel were wandering in the desert, having escaped slavery in Egypt. Our gospel reading is part of the conversation recorded in John's gospel between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Readings: Numbers 21. 4-9
John 3. 9-17

**StF 78: Give thanks with a grateful heart,
give thanks to the Holy One;**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=047xtru0ZR0>

Address

We are in Lent, the time when we prepare to remember and to celebrate Our Lord's self sacrifice on the cross to save us. But what do we mean by that phrase? How can we explain this to other people?

Our lessons today follow the lectionary. Our Gospel reading is a part of the long discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish Ruling Council. He had questions to ask Jesus. He wanted to know more about who Jesus was.

In his gospel John records a long conversation between the two of them. Towards the end comes the passage that we have just read. Jesus explains to Nicodemus:

"No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Nicodemus was a Jew and a Pharisee. He would have known well the story of Moses lifting up the snake in the desert. It isn't a well known story now, so I thought that it was worth spending time looking at it this morning. Then we will be able to understand better how Jesus was answering the questions that Nicodemus had.

Our first reading from the Book of Numbers is that story. What was Jesus saying when he referred to it?

The story comes from the time when the Israelites were wandering round the desert on their way to the Promised Land. By then they had been living in the desert for a long time and they were fed up. In particular, they had had enough of manna as a food.

We are told earlier in the Book of Numbers (Numbers 11. 7-9) that the manna came down overnight with the dew. The Israelites made flour from it by grinding it up with hand mills or mortars. Then they boiled it and made it into flat cakes. We are told that it tasted like pastries baked with olive oil.

It's not difficult to work out why the Israelites had become bored with a diet of manna. They began to speak against God and Moses "Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?"

So God sent poisonous snakes among the people and many were bitten and died.

There are times when God loves us so much that He tells us that what we are doing is wrong. When we are responsible for someone, and we see them doing something wrong, the easy thing to do is to turn a blind eye and say nothing. It's easier to say nothing rather than start a difficult conversation or face a scene. We've all met the over indulged child who has little self control or motivation and often the person we feel most sorry for is the child.

God knew that an attitude of grumbling and doing nothing would be fatal for a small band of nomads wandering through a desert where food was scarce.

As soon as the people accepted that they had done wrong in speaking against God and Moses, and asked Moses to pray for them, God acted. God told Moses to make a replica of one of the snakes and attach it to a pole. Moses did this and told the people that anyone who had been bitten would not die if they looked at the bronze replica snake on the pole.

That does seem a strange thing to do. Anyone who has been bitten by a poisonous snake needs treatment. Looking at an object on a pole doesn't sound to us to be a sensible way to treat snake bite. I guess the people then also didn't think it was a sensible way to treat snakebite.

God's offer of an immediate cure from the poison needed some sort of faith – faith that it was worth trying, faith that just as God had helped them in the past, He was helping them now. However odd, however irrational it might seem, that was what the people who had been bitten by the poisonous snakes had to do to be cured.

It is this old story from Israel's past that Jesus used to explain to Nicodemus who He was and what He would do. Jesus said:

"As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life."

This old story is a simple picture to convey the truth that Jesus' death on the cross freed us from our sins to live a life free from guilt, a life that will continue after death. Sometimes a picture can convey a deep truth better than any amount of words.

I'm talking about this picture this morning to help us to explain first to ourselves, then to those outside the church, what we believe and how we find the faith that sets us free. This is a faith that offers repentance, forgiveness for wrongs done and new life. It is a faith to live by.

The very basis of our faith is that there is a god, and he is a God who cares for all the people in the world. He wishes us well: He wants to help us. He values us, each one of us.

Public opinion polls show that quite a lot of the population have a belief in God, perhaps a majority of people, depending on how the question is asked. But I would suggest that for most people their "belief" is a vague yes to the idea that there can be an all powerful being who is superior in some way to human beings. There is no definition of that God. He (or She or It) is just "out there somewhere".

However the opinion polls also show that many people pray. They have a belief, a bit of hope perhaps, that this "God" whom they do not know may help them in a time of crisis.

So we need to tell them who Jesus is. He is the baby in the manger at Christmas time, but who did he grow up to be? What did he do when he grew up? Why is he so important?

Given time, and a sympathetic listener, I think that we could all tell the story of Jesus' life, starting from the baby in the manger to his life as a preacher and teacher. We would be able to explain that Jesus chose to be born into this world as a human being so that he could tell us that God truly loves us and wants to help us improve our lives.

So if such a conversation ever happened, it would be one lasting over weeks or months. Let us pray that if we were ever asked to say what we knew about Jesus, we would have the courage to try and give a good reply. The Bible assures us that in doing this we wouldn't be alone. In Matthew 10.19 we read "Do not worry about what you are going to say or how you will say it; when the time comes you will be given what you will say. For the words you will speak will not be yours; they will come from the Spirit of your father speaking through you."

When Jesus was talking to Nicodemus, a teacher of the Jews, He explained who He was by referring to the Old Testament. Nicodemus was a devout Jew so we can be sure that Nicodemus knew the Old Testament well and revered it. So the story that Jesus used meant something to his audience. The first Christians were all Jews and that is one of the reasons why we so often find early Christians quoting from the Old Testament.

When Paul and other disciples began to preach to non Jews, to the Gentiles, they couldn't use this type of language. A reading that Chris used last week is helpful here. St Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1. 22-25)

"Jews want miracles for proof, and Greeks look for wisdom. As for us, we proclaim the crucified Christ, a message that is offensive to the Jews and nonsense to the Gentiles; but for those whom God has called, ..., this message is Christ, who is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For what seems to be God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and what seems to be God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

What we are saying to the world this Easter is, in the words of the Apostles Creed:

I believe in Jesus Christ, ...
[who] suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again.

This Easter we are saying that there is a life after death. This world is a lobby, a passageway, an entrance, to the life everlasting. It is a life that we need not fear because Jesus our Saviour has been there already. He has told us about it; and we can trust Him. We can believe in Him and in Him we can find salvation and forgiveness for those wrongs and errors that we have committed in this world.

What a message for a time of covid 19! What a message for this Easter! What a message of hope and good news! A message for the fear that many people carry and which is aggravated at present as we hear over and over again of covid deaths. This life isn't all that there is. There is another; it is a better life; and it is open to all.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was the first message of the Christian Church. It is still our message.

Praise to God for His mercy; praise to our Saviour Christ for His entry into our world and for His death on the cross; praise to the Holy Spirit who nourishes the church.
Amen

Let us praise our Saviour as we sing our next hymn

**StF 272: From heaven you came, helpless babe,
Entered our world, your glory veiled** *The Servant King 4vv*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zCAdWs-ZyEk>

We will now pray for other people and for our world.

**To the sentence Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Please respond Bring hope to your world today.**

God our Father
Grant us the help of your Spirit
In our prayers for all people

First we remember all the countries of our world, still affected by the continuing scourge of covid 19. Thank you for the vaccines that have been found and that many of us have received. Please guide the scientists as they continue their research. We ask also that you help the leaders of the nations to manage the economic and social problems that the virus has brought

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

Next we pray for our country.
May we be diligent in taking care of one another at this difficult time.
We pray for all the carers, nurses and medical staff involved. Give them energy and persistence to keep working away at the task in front of them

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for the Church throughout the World.
We pray for our church and for the other churches in our area.
Give strength to our ministers and church leaders to chart a way forward, to comfort and to encourage

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We pray for our friends and neighbours.
We pray for all those who are dear to us.
In the silence, let us pray for those we know who are in distress of mind or body. Let them know that you are there and that you bring healing and strength

**Lord of all, the Word made flesh
Bring hope to your world today.**

We offer all these prayers in the mighty name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen**

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

Our closing hymn sums up the Easter message.

**StF 418: We have a gospel to proclaim,
good news for all throughout the earth; 6vv**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-SPYAgCtkw>

Closing Prayers

Lord of heaven and earth,
all creation resounds with your praise.
As we rejoice in your presence
may we know your power to save.
Now and for ever,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

We finish our service by sharing 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