

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 22:25-28

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfil my vows.

The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the LORD will praise him-- may your hearts live forever!

All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations.

PRAISE

- Hymn StF 409 Let us build a house (Two Oaks)

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

- Prayer of Adoration

Living God,
we praise you that the gospel speaks not just of what you've done,
but also of what you're doing,
not simply of the resurrection of Jesus long ago,
but equally,
and all the more so,
of his risen life now and the new life he offers to us in turn.

Thank you for the way,
through him,
you are able to transform every moment,
bringing joy out of sorrow
and hope out of despair.

And thank you for the knowledge that, whatever life may bring,
you are with us,
through your Spirit,
to lead us forward from darkness into light.

Teach us to put our trust wholly in you,
confident that, come wind or rain,
sunshine or shadow,
you will be there by our side,
now and always. **Amen.**

WORD

- Acts 8:26-40

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet.

The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it." Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

"How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?"

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?"

And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

- Address – Stuff Happens!

There's a lot of exotic detail in the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch to titillate the imagination. Why was the Ethiopian following the Jewish practices? Does it have anything to do with the fact that there is Judaism in Ethiopia today? Was he really a eunuch, which would have disbarred him under the Law from being considered a practising Jew or even a proselyte? Domestic rulers of that time did have a practice of making sure that their principal advisers and administrators were eunuchs, so that they had no possibility of fathering children who might upset the regime or would disturb their focus on serving their master. Yet by that time the term eunuch might just indicate a high official. Did Philip have the stamina of Olympic marathon runner to keep up with

the chariot, or was it, as some suggest, not much better than oxcart – quite slow-moving, but nevertheless a step up from the rabble that had to walk to get anywhere. And what about Philip's translocation after the incident to Ashdod from Gaza? Lots of interesting things, but unfortunately, they can divert us from more significant matters.

The key point can be summed up in the phrase – stuff happens. It just happened that Philip felt impelled to go out on the Gaza road. It just happened that he was encouraged to go up to the chariot with the Ethiopian eunuch in it. It just happened that the eunuch was reading from the Prophets. It just happened that the text was one of the key Old Testament texts that the Early Church felt pointed towards Jesus. It just happened that when addressed by this unknown stranger on the road the eunuch was sufficiently open to seek enlightenment. It just happened that the eunuch asked the core question about the passage – who did it refer to? It just happened that having heard Philip's convincing explanation that they came across a pool of water alongside a desert road. It just happened.

This story has the ring of truth about it because it reflects what we know from our own experience – stuff happens. Why stuff happens is not too difficult to understand. We have the free will to make choices, a key characteristic of animal existence. But the choices that we make can be complex because we have the ability of self-reflection – standing outside ourselves and looking at our actions as if we were a third party. More than this, we can empathise – to put ourselves in the mind of another person and to think what they might have done. As far as we know we are the only creature in God's creation that can do this. It's such an important part of our mental life that we practice it all the time. It has its upsides - we can anticipate possibilities as yet unrealised and that gives hope. It has its downsides - we can sometimes think of the worst that could happen, and then act as though it had. We also practice this ability by playing games – again something unique to humans, indeed it has been suggested we should not be called homo sapiens at all, but rather homo ludens. But this kind of thinking and our ability to make free choices brings complexity. Think simple game of chess. There is a limited board, a limited number of pieces, each piece has a limited number of moves, and there is a single clear objective. Nevertheless, if we want to analyse all the possibilities in a game of chess, we will have to consider 8×10^{32} possibilities – that's eight with thirty-two zeros after it – more than we could possibly contemplate, or even have the time to contemplate.

So instead we find shortcuts. There are some things that we do all the time without considering the options carefully – these are habits. There are things that we choose between a limited number of strategies – just as in a game of chess. We recognise that when we are faced with decisions that our choices are generally limited by circumstance, environment, or our own history. So we make decisions serially. We choose between limited list of options, often based on inadequate information, and then we are presented with another set of choices. We make repeated choices, but always, because we are limited by the fact that time is not repeatable, we go forward. We cannot go back and retake decisions. Sometimes we take decisions without thinking about the consequences at all. We don't consider every decision significant. How many of us have confronted a teenager who has just done a particularly stupid thing with the words "what were you thinking of?" in the perfect knowledge that they weren't thinking at all. As we take decisions in this way can sometimes find ourselves in circumstances that we never planned. Stuff happens.

But saying this does not mean that we are just subject to a random stream of events. We recognise in our thinking about choices that there are causes and effects, the result of events being separated in time, but linked. Even when things do appear to be pretty random, there is a common experience in humankind that seemingly unconnected events somehow come together to create something new and different. The Austrian psychologist, Carl Jung, called this experience synchronicity. The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is a classic case of synchronicity. All of the events in the story come together to make something new – the first glimpses of a move in the Early Church away from its roots as a Jewish sect towards a universal faith. The confirmation of this change comes as the Ethiopian eunuch receives the Holy Spirit. The significance of this can't be overstated. Philip, one of Jesus's disciples, comes from the Greek community. He has baptised the Ethiopian eunuch, who on the face of it cannot be a member of the Jewish community. The Holy Spirit has confirmed that both the baptised and the baptised are part of God's plan. By doing so, both are affirming that God has no favourites, and that God's love is for all – no exceptions. We can, perhaps, also learn something from this evangelistic event. There is no preaching to massed crowds as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, this is strictly a one-to-one experience for both. Over the past few weeks we have been wrestling as a Church with the issue of how best to fulfil our calling to evangelism. We have agreed that we don't find it easy. Sometimes we think of that aspect of our Christian life as involving special events, big rallies, revivals, and campaigning. And sometimes these methods are appropriate. But sometimes they feel more like a sudden sally of a group of warriors in a besieged castle to leave the safety of the Church and go on a raiding party to bring others in, and we count our success by the number of "scalps" taken. We can sometimes lose that sense of the offer of love and gift from God in the process. One-to-one it can feel much more loving and humbling, for it is, as one writer expressed, "one beggar trying to show another beggar where to find bread". But in a one-to-one encounter we must be on the alert for when that synchronicity of events presents itself, and we need to be prepared to seize the moment. As Christians we look for God's hand in the synchronicity of events. For God is not distant, but deeply involved not only in the act of creation but in its continuing development. Our God intervenes, to correct wrong choices, to help us make the right choice, and to save us from the consequences of bad choices that cannot be undone. Sometimes we can only see this when we look back on the history of events; it is so difficult sometimes to see the hand of God in the present. In telling his story of his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch Philip felt that he had been impelled by God to act, and hence his interpretation of events in terms of the action of God in commanding him to go, commanding him to speak, and encouraging him to baptise in the name of Christ.

Not everybody sees it like this. After all the phrase that I've use this morning – stuff happens – also has a cruder, more brutal, variant that perhaps came to your mind when I said it. That cruder form expresses a view of the world and its events as a harsher more brutal place where random things happen that destroy in a meaningless way. Perhaps one way to avoid a choice between these phrases is to choose another – things happen – reflecting on the fact that in Old English the word thing not only covers something that exists, or a material object, but can also denote "a narrative not fully known" and "the unknowability of a larger chain of events". So "things happen", in the widest sense of the word, and what we see in the synchronicity of the world is the hand of the Creator, who stands outside of creation and time, whilst we live within creation and within time. Our choices affect not only ourselves, but others. Indeed, our choices over time have influenced our world to such an extent that geologists have now agreed to call our current time a new geological period – the Anthropocene – the time of

humans, because we are influencing our planet's environment so much. So how we do this, and the basis of our choices, need to be in alignment with the will of God.

- Hymn StF 403 God is love: his the care (Theodoric)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2I4wHr6wAc>

LAMENT

- Prayer of Confession

Lord Jesus Christ,
you call us to walk in the light,
yet so often we walk instead in darkness.

We know that we should love one another -
that we should put the needs of others before our own,
denying ourselves in order to give service -
but the pull of self-interest is hard to resist.
We know that we should put aside everything
that destroys relationships -
everything that comes between us and our neighbour,
that comes between us and you -
but old habits are hard to overcome.
We know that we should put faith into action -
not just talking about love
but expressing it through deeds,
not just speaking of your kingdom
but striving to bring it closer -
yet so often we fail to practise what we preach.
Instead of shining as a lamp set on a hill
we hide our light under a bushel.

Forgive us those times we have spread darkness rather than light -
the words that have wounded,
sown discontent,
cast judgement
or spoken falsely;
the deeds that have caused bitterness,
created trouble,
denied love
or abandoned responsibility.
Forgive everything in our lives which undermines your purpose
and betrays our calling.

We ask it for your name's sake. **Amen.**

- Hymn StF 410 Lord, your church on earth is seeking (Abbots Leigh)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnYUfhtz11Q>

- Prayer of Intercession

To produce fruit we need to be joined on to the true vine.

Let us pray to the Lord God Almighty,
in whom we live and move and have our being.

Father, we want to produce good fruit in abundance;
nurture us as branches of the true vine,
train and prune us where necessary,
and may our spiritual harvest make rich wine,
wine of your kingdom.

Silence

Your kingdom, let it come!
Your will, let it be done!

Father, clearly we see around our world
the tragic and expensive consequences
of branches cut off from the true vine.
We pray for a seeking after your truth
and a desire to act rightly and justly
in all areas of human society.

Silence

Your kingdom, let it come!
Your will, let it be done!

Father, we pray for those to whom we are linked
by family, friendships or work;
especially we pray for those
separated from their loved ones or their home.

Silence

Your kingdom, let it come!
Your will, let it be done!

Father, we long for healing and wholeness in all who suffer
and in all dysfunctional communities;
guide us to understand
how we might be part of the healing.

Silence

Your kingdom, let it come!
Your will, let it be done!

Father, we know that death
cannot separate us from your love;
in that knowledge we commend to your keeping
those who have died and all who miss them.

Silence

Your kingdom, let it come!
Your will, let it be done!

Father, we thank you that we can live in the joyful freedom of your love,
as we dedicate ourselves to serving others.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ, who taught us when we pray to say.....

- Lords Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.**

- Hymn StF 663 I, the Lord of sea and sky (Here I am Lord)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA2fMeXEKLA>

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.**