

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

Bible Month – Looking at the end of Mark’s Gospel

❖ Opening Verse

Open our eyes to your presence.
Open our ears to your call.
Open our hearts to your mercies,
that you may be all in all.

Forgive our sins of omission:
our pride and our thoughtless ways;
forgive our sins of commission:
the tongues that lead others astray.

Take from us sloth and apathy,
all spirit of blame or despair.
Give us eyes for fresh ventures,
that we may sweep through the air.

Thank you for this family of Christians,
for the marvellous ways you have led.
Thank you for your hand now guiding us
to good challenges further ahead.

Give us this day your wisdom
and love for each and all.
Help us to learn to listen
and together respond to your call.

PRAISE

❖ Hymn/Song (StF 25/H&P 653) God is here! As we his people (Bethany)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4dS03wepFs>

God is here! As we his people
meet to offer praise and prayer,
may we find in fuller measure
what it is in Christ we share:
Here, as in the world around us,
all our varied skills and arts
wait the coming of His Spirit
into open minds and hearts

Here are symbols to remind us
of our lifelong need of grace;
here are table, font and pulpit,
here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
here in silence, as in speech,
here in newness and renewal
God the Spirit comes to each.

Here our children find a welcome
in the Shepherd's flock and fold;
here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
seek in worship to explore
what it means in daily living
to believe and to adore.

Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
in an age of change and doubt,
keep us faithful to the gospel,
help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
all we have to give, receive;
we who cannot live without you,
we adore you! We believe.

❖ Prayer of Praise

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.

❖ Hymn/Song (H&P 769) God is working his purpose out (Benson)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FkXpVSribU>

- 1 God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year,
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

- 2 What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase the harmony of all the world, the reign of the Prince of Peace? What can we do to hasten the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea?
- 3 March we forth in the strength of God with the banner of Christ unfurled, That the light of the glorious gospel of truth may shine throughout the world. Fight we the fight with sorrow and sin, to set their captives free, that the earth may be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.
- 4 All we can do is nothing worth unless God blesses the deed; vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed; yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.

WORD

❖ Mark 16:1-20

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized

will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

❖ Address: A sense of an ending

In 2011 Julian Barnes won the Booker prize for fiction with his novel "The Sense of an Ending". Julian Barnes took his title from a book written by Frank Kermode in which he discussed modern literary fiction, and the way in which a reader always try to get "The Sense of an Ending" however confusing the narrative had been. He explored ways in which we always look for some sort of meaningful sense of events, and how, even within a piece of fiction, we look for a continuation of the narrative in our head. This perhaps explains the tremendous interest we have in books and films for sequels, prequels, and attempts by modern authors to finish off half written texts by earlier, more traditional authors.

I use this phrase "the sense of an ending" because most of the gospels that we have, have been adjusted at some point in the past to finish them off and give them some sense of an ending or meaning for the future. The most obvious example is that of Mark's gospel, which we have been considering over the last few weeks. The oldest texts of Mark's gospel end at chapter 16 and verse eight which reads:

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

The remaining verses – 9 to 20 – are now generally thought to have been added later, probably by an editor in the second century A.D., compared to Mark's original version which was probably written around A.D. 68 to 70. Some have suggested that the late editor felt that ending with the women being "afraid" was somehow not proper and added the paragraphs about Mary of Magdala and the mission of the disciples in continuing Jesus' miraculous ministry. But there is more to it than that. When you look at the other gospels you also find that they have had their endings changed. John's gospel is the most obvious example. In John chapter 20 the clear ending is at verse 30 & 31 which reads:

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

But then we have the whole of chapter 21 in which an additional story is added about the disciples going fishing after Jesus' crucifixion and meeting Jesus who tells them where to fish. The ending of Matthew's gospel is better integrated than Mark and John where the join is obvious. But scholars believe that Matthew's gospel may originally have been written in Aramaic and was later translated by a Greek editor who rearranged the gospel so that it fell into five big sections of teaching and miracles – mirroring the five books of the Torah in the Jewish faith - indicating that the book's primary audience was Jewish Christians. Matthew had access to Mark's gospel, and to a series of writings that Luke used as well called "Q" by German scholars meaning Quelle – a spring or source. As a result the editor added in extra material and produces several apparent duplicates – like the feeding of the 5000 and also the feeding of the 4000, which may relate to the same event. The ending that is thought to have been added is after chapter 28 verse 15 which relates to stories about the resurrection. We then get chapter 28 verse 16 - the Great Commission – which uses references to baptism (also in Mark's added ending) which were not part of Jesus' original ministry but were a key part of the Early Church's activity. Baptism was used within the Jewish faith for non-Jews who wish to follow the Jewish way as a symbol of renunciation of their old life. With the change from being a Jewish sect to universal Church and the influx of many Gentiles this Jewish rite was taken on board by the emerging Christian Church as being a symbol of entry into God's people, as it is today. It also references the baptism formula that we also use today of "The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a Trinitarian formula that was not developed until much later.

Of all the gospels Luke is the narrative that does not appear to have been added to by a later editor. But this reflects the fact that Luke tells us when writing to his fictitious reader – Theophilus – (a name which means "God lover") that he is writing a two-part narrative. The first part is the gospel, but the second part is the Acts of the Apostles, and Luke sees Acts as a continuation of the gospel story. The first part of Acts, like the gospel, is pulled together from evidence Luke has had from others, but towards the end of Acts we find Luke no longer talking about Paul and Peter in the third person but saying "we", showing that he was present particularly during Paul's final journey to Rome. It's at the end of Acts that we get Luke's "the sense of an ending" moment when in verse 30 and 31 the story of Paul's journeys and life sort of dribbles to a rather lame conclusion.

Interesting, no doubt, but what does this matter of endings have to say to us? Well in the first place it tells us something about the issues faced by the Early Church as we ask the questions about why the gospels were written in the first place, and why these endings were added. The key lies in Luke's two-part

narrative. The Acts of the Apostles is written as a continuation of the gospel story. The endings that we find in John, Mark, and Matthew, all emphasise the continuing activity of the Church in preaching and teaching. This contrasts quite strongly with the belief held by the first Christians that Jesus would return within the lifetime of his hearers. When Jesus did not then the Church faced a crisis. We can see this in some of the earliest parts of the New Testament – Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians - who are deeply concerned that some of their numbers are dying, and Jesus has yet to return. Paul tells them that human timescales are virtually meaningless in the context of a timeless God and that those who died will be present at Jesus’ Second Coming and will rise in the General Resurrection that will occur. But there were other issues as well that arose from this belief. It is clear from Acts that the Early Church believers sold their possessions and lived together on the proceeds in a communistic community. This worked well until the money ran out, and Paul was obliged to have an “whip round” of his Gentile congregations to help the struggling Jerusalem Church. So the Church had to make an adjustment away from believing that Christ would return soon to settling down for the “long haul”. To do that they needed to continue the mission of Jesus, which is why the three additions that we find in Mark, Matthew, and John all relate to the continuing missionary activity of the Church. In Mark’s gospel, after a description of Jesus’ appearances to the disciples that picks up some of the instances related in the other gospels, he commands them to go out and preach to the entire world and evidence this by the same miracles that form the first part of Mark’s gospel. In Matthew’s account we have the Great Commission that we’ve already looked at, and in John’s gospel we have Jesus commanding Peter, in a three-part commissioning that reverses Peter’s three-part denial, to lead the Church into the future. The continuation of Jesus’ ministry is the key point of all these additions. But that raises the question for the Church of who is the Jesus that they preach, and what was the ministry that they are to continue.

The gospel writers tell us that they want to set down a proper story about Jesus to counter some of the confusion about who he was that was raging in the Early Church. Mark is keen to tell his Greek readers that Jesus was something more than a miracle worker – though the miracles are a key part of indicating that his teaching came from God. So while the first part of his gospel is full of miracles, then comes the key turning point when Jesus asked his disciples “Who do people say that I am?”, and “Who do you say that I am?”. When Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the second part of Mark’s gospel concentrates on Jesus teaching the disciples about the kingdom of God. The third and final act of Mark is to describe Jesus’s death and resurrection. This places Jesus way beyond the “another miracle worker” of popular Greek interpretation. As we have seen, the edited version of Matthew is aimed specifically at a Jewish audience and emphasises the continuity of Jesus with the promises of God to the Jewish people in the Old Testament. Jesus is the

promised “Messiah” expected by the Jewish people. Luke makes it clear that he wants to set down a properly evidenced narrative about the life of Jesus as a real human being – hence his constant references to specific points in time that could be identified by his readers. John does not set out to write a narrative, but by key themes and several signs seeks to tell us who Jesus was and his relationship to God. As we seen at the end of his gospel, he does this to ensure that we understand and believe Jesus is God’s only Son, and that through him we to can become God’s children.

The gospel writers were addressing the key issues and understandings of their time. The first century A.D. was a time of great crisis. The world was dominated by great empires sustained by military power; there was gross inequality with grinding poverty side-by-side with lavish and conspicuous consumption; the economic situation was a mess, the state provided truly little for the common people, (except for the inhabitants of Rome who were kept politically quiet with “bread and circuses”), with most spending going on the military and on infrastructure to support military dominance. The expectation that private individuals would provide public services was being undermined by the selfishness of the wealthy. There was a loss of faith in the old gods, who seemed more like Marvel’s superheroes than moral characters who encouraged compassionate ethical behaviour. People believed that they were at the mercy of a dark impersonal fate that was a stranger to love. There was a widespread belief that the end of the world was coming. The spirit of the people darkened, and in the darkness, they looked to mystery cults, special hidden knowledge, and secular philosophies to try and find a way out of their social and spiritual impasse. It was into this environment the Early Church was born, and so it became critical for them to explain both of their believers and to the wider world the message of Jesus and who Jesus was. So, as the first generation of those who had known Jesus personally began to die the Gospels came to be written to provide the basis for the Early Church to survive.

It is not hard to draw parallels with our own time. There are those who believe that the end of the world is imminent and behave accordingly. I come from a religiously diverse family and my aunt and uncle were both firm Jehovah’s Witnesses. Their Church had calculated that the world would end in 1974 and my father, who had no religious faith, reported that the date was clearly painted on the wall behind the lectern in the Kingdom Hall where my aunt and uncle were elders. In 1975, when visiting them in Hampshire he told me, with a sly grin, that the date had been painted out, but unfortunately the dark lettering was “grinning through” the topcoat that had been applied. We can laugh at this, but the truth is my aunt and uncle spent every penny that they received, because there was no need to build up savings for their future, gave their children the barest minimum of education, because there was no point in them having a career, so much so that when my aunt finally died, we were invited to take a keepsake from her personal belongings – which were a few scraps that

barely covered a small table. Like the first century Jewish Christians their strong belief that the end was coming conditioned their behaviour.

Just at present these millennial trends seem to be building, and perhaps with some justification. Since the turn of the millennium we have seen three crises develop. The financial crisis of 2008/10 which created mountains of public debt to bail out reckless banks and years of austerity that undermined our public services and increased inequalities; the current pandemic which adds to that debt and inequality, and where our response creates an economic, social, mental, and future health crisis which will have long lasting effects; and an impending climate change crisis which is truly existential in terms of the sustainability of human society on this planet. Facing these crises we have a world divided among squabbling superpowers; where the world economy is in a mess, with gross inequalities; and where cooperation between states seems at a low point in the face of future perils. In the face of this people may well feel a loss of personal control over their lives; that they are mercy of a blind impersonal fate that is a stranger to love. Belief seems to be at a low ebb, and the Church struggles to make its voice heard amongst a welter of secular philosophies, mystery cults, and claims of special knowledge. Perhaps the principal difference between our experience and that of the first century is that the crises that face our world are not from some random chance but the consequence of human activities.

What should the Church's response be in such circumstances? It should not, I believe, be that being espoused by a number of millennialist evangelicals, particularly in the United States, who believe that these crises should be welcomed because it will in some way encourage the Second Coming of Jesus – as if by doing nothing we somehow force God's hand to act to sort it all out in a way that will save a minority of the faithful, at the expense of the damnation of the rest. I am reminded of the story that Jan told us about the man in a flood who rejected offers of help, confident that God would save him personally. When he drowned and confronted God about His lack of response, God reminded him that He had sent a tractor, boat and a helicopter – what more did he want! Instead, we should look to the traditional message of the Church that we find in the Gospels – of a God of love who desires the best for his Creation, and who is prepared to suffer for us and alongside us through the person of Jesus to give us the opportunity to repent, receive forgiveness, and to be reconciled so that we can work for God's Kingdom, not expect it to drop into our laps. Too often the millennialists' view of the world looks back with longing to a "happier time" when faith was strong and things were "good" – a time often more a myth than reality. They look to the future in despair and long for God to intervene and sort it all out.

But the message of the gospels is "good news", looking forward in hope to God's kingdom. Above all, we should look in hope to the future, not in despair,

and act for the “long haul”. We should also look for “the sense of an ending”, that may see things being vastly different to the way that we have expected and be prepared to make the kind of change for the Early Church was required to make to move forward into a better future. If this pandemic has taught us anything it is that we shouldn’t look at it in despair as destroying everything we hold dear in the practice of our faith, but as giving us new opportunities to do “old” things in new ways that proclaims God’s love in hope to the world. What will that change be? The British theologian, Andrew Shanks has written about an experience of God that he calls “the solidarity of the shaken”, the sense of coming together in the face of a shock that has unsettled our sense of certainty, that disturbed our complacency. We have experienced such a shock in this pandemic, and it has brought out a greater sense of community, of care for the vulnerable, of re-assessment of the value of key workers and their relative economic rewards. From this, things can, and will change. What this will mean for the Church I can only guess at, but perhaps a point for further thought is the pattern of Church practice. For centuries this has been based around a Western catholic church model - a governing hierarchy; community buildings; a common community faith; communal worship. But before this there was a Celtic Christianity, based on a pilgrimage in life, centres of faith and worship, silence, and remote places amongst other things. A different model to be explored for different times that more resemble the early years of the Church.

*These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.*

as TS Eliot puts it. Worth thinking about perhaps?

❖ Prayer

Protecting God,
when we fall, you quietly pick us up;
when we fear, you gently hold on to us;
when the future looks bleak, you nudge us onwards,
until at last we find ourselves
in the place you would have us be.

LAMENT

- ❖ Hymn/Song (StF 486/H&P 688) who would true valour see (Monks Gate)

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

Who would true valour see,
let him come hither;
one here will constant be,
come wind, come weather;
there's no discouragement
shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
with dismal stories
do but themselves confound;
his strength the more is.
No lion can him fright;
he'll with a giant fight;
but he will have a right
to be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
can daunt his spirit;
he knows he at the end
shall life inherit.
Then fancies fly away,
he'll fear not what men say;
he'll labour night and day
to be a pilgrim.

- ❖ Prayers of Intercession

Let us lay at the feet
of God our Father
our needs and our cares,
as we pray together
in the Spirit of Jesus.

We lay at his feet
the need for ministry and leadership,
for a firm witness by all Christians
in the face of materialism and oppression;
for zeal and dedication among all members of the body of Christ.

Silence

Lord, we trust you:
hold us safe in your hand.

We lay at his feet
the needs of our divided, fractious world;
its systems and schemes,
fashions and disasters;
that God's kingdom of love
may be established on earth,
as it is in heaven.

Silence

Lord, we trust you:
hold us safe in your hand.

We lay at his feet
the needs of all who suffer
in earthquakes, floods, droughts,
famine and epidemics;
all who try to supply relief
and medical aid;
that in Christ we may labour
for the good of the world.

Silence

Lord, we trust you:
hold us safe in your hand.

We lay at his feet
the needs of this community;
the local problems and injustices;
our Christian usefulness
in this corner of God's world.

Silence

Lord, we trust you:
hold us safe in your hand.

In silence, now,
we bring our private prayers to God who knows what is in our hearts.

Silence

God our Father,
trusting in your constant care and protection,
we bring you these prayers
in the name of Jesus.
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/Song (StF 487/SoF 640) You shall go out with joy

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqGStx4zios>

You shall go out with joy
and be led forth with peace,
and the mountains and the hills
shall break forth before you.

There'll be shouts of joy
and the trees of the field
shall clap, shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field
shall clap their hands,

and the trees of the field
shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field
shall clap their hands,
and you'll go out with joy.

Blessing

God be with you whatever you pass.
Jesus be with you whatever you climb.
Spirit be with you wherever you stay.

And the blessing of God the Father,
God the Son,
And God the Holy Spirit
Remain with us all. **Amen.**