

Church at Home

East Leake Methodist Church 25 July 2021

“The Body of Christ”

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

Let us praise God as the creator of our world

**StF 136: Morning has broken
Like the first morning:**

3vv

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=we-n-Zmglt0>

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 *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 oth-
ers 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.

Our readings are both about how the church grows and flourishes. In the Letter to the Ephesians, St Paul compares the church to the Body of Christ. He emphasizes that we all in our different ways have a part to play. Our second reading is from John's gospel. We will hear Jesus compare Himself to the true vine. By living and growing in Him we will grow in our faith and our Christian life.

Readings: **Ephesians 4. 1-16**

John 15. 1-8

We praise Jesus as the true vine and as the foundation of our faith

**StF 544: As the deer pants for the water,
so my soul longs after you.**

3vv

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jv6Z8t1Tz_g

Address

My address today is from a famous passage in St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. In it he compares the church to the Body of Christ – in other words, a way in which Christ exists at a human level in the world today. As such we have the responsibility of representing our Lord as best we can.

I'm going to discuss this topic in three parts.

Firstly, I want to reflect on what we as a church have done during the present epidemic. Let us take time to remember what has happened.

Secondly, let's look at our readings. Let us look at what St Paul achieved despite the difficulties that he faced; and

Finally, let's think about what may come next for us.

The life of a church depends on the commitment of its members. If the members don't support their church, if they don't care for the buildings, passers by think that there is nothing going on and ignore the church completely.

What have we done as the Body of Christ in this place during the three lockdowns that we have experienced? Our building was closed by the government in March last year and again in November. Between January and April this year we were closed again. This time it wasn't because the government forced us to do this. We chose to close to help prevent the spread of covid. We felt that we could best show the love of Christ for His world by taking the step of closing at a time when infections and deaths were increasing rapidly.

In April we felt able to restart services, but with full covid precautions in place. In May, thanks to the success of the vaccination programme, the government allowed some more community activities. The exercise classes who meet here have restarted, as have the two brownie units. As I write this, the stewards are considering what exactly to do in the light of the government's declaration that all restrictions on social contact have been removed. Please pray for us. If you have any suggestions, let us know.

These have been difficult times. We lost Doug to covid very early on. Members have had to cope with illness, in some cases serious illness. This has been, and continues to be, worsened by difficulties in getting medical appointments. The many restrictions on our lives have led to isolation. All church meetings in our building were stopped.

On the positive side we have been able to use email and zoom to hold our services in new ways.

Have we continued in our commitment to represent Christ in this place? Have we continued to be the Body of Christ here? I can give a resounding YES to this question. Closed our building has been, but we have continued to meet via telephone calls, and email and zoom services. Our building has been maintained as carefully as ever by Bryan and Greg. Our garden has never looked better, thanks to John. As a church we have sufficient money to pay our bills as they fall due. Our reserves have been depleted but we are not broke yet! Thank you for all your contributions, those that I have mentioned and those that I haven't.

So we thank God for His help in all that we have done. Let's encourage ourselves as we review the past 15 months. I think that we can give ourselves a little pat on the back. We have achieved something good.

For the second part of my address I will turn to our readings. Like us, St Paul was going through a difficult time. He wrote his letter to the Ephesians while he was in prison in Rome. Our reading began "As a prisoner for the Lord ..." In fact, many of his letters were written from prison - Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, Philemon and 2 Timothy.

He was in prison because while he was staying in Jerusalem he had been accused by some Jews from the province of Asia (now Turkey) of preaching against Judaism and of defiling the Temple in Jerusalem. A mob gathered in Jerusalem and a riot broke out. The Roman soldiers restored order in the city by seizing Paul and dragging him off to their citadel. In effect, they saved his life. They rescued him from the mob that was beating him up. St Luke tells us all about it in Acts chapter 21.

After that, Paul was in prison for some years. First while waiting for trials in Judaea, then during his voyage across the Mediterranean Sea from Judaea to Rome, and lastly in Rome itself. For all of this time St Luke was with him. Luke wrote a detailed account for us in Acts. Acts concludes with Paul under house arrest in Rome for two years. Later it is thought that he was moved to the Mamertine prison in Rome. He was beheaded outside the walls of Rome in about AD 66 during the persecution of Christians by the Emperor Nero.

So Paul had plenty of difficulties, far worse than our present problems. How did he manage? He never forgot that wonderful encounter he had with His Saviour on the road to Damascus. He saw a bright light and heard Jesus say to him

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads". Next Jesus commissioned him as a servant and witness to the gospel. It was St Paul's faith in his Saviour kept him strong.

I also want to focus for a minute on our second reading from St John's gospel. I like gardening and the image of God the Father as a gardener means a lot to me. We all know that if you are gardening, or growing crops, you can't just leave the plants to themselves. For example, in this weather they need watering. And of course they need deadheading, pruning and cutting back at some times of the year.

Jesus compares himself to the true vine. Branches are grafted onto a vine. They become part of the stem and draw nourishment through the roots of the original plant. But some grafts don't take. Others grow too much and need cutting back.

Jesus said

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful."

St Paul experienced some of that "cutting back", that "pruning", as he spent years of his life as a prisoner. As he was confined to his house, or in prison, did he wonder why God had let him be treated so? Did he ever feel sorry for himself? I'm sure that he did. Anyone would.

But he remained faithful to the Jesus who had called him all those years ago. He got on with what he could do. Not going out on his missionary journeys any more, but instead, writing letters to the young churches he had founded, and whom he could no longer visit.

So St Paul used his time in prison in Rome to greet his visitors, to preach to the Romans, including to his guard, and to write those letters. As he sat in chains in Rome writing those letters did he imagine in his wildest dreams that we would be studying them in East Leake today? That would have been a pure fantasy for him. Yet here we are.

Such is the power of Christ's message of forgiveness and of hope that it travels over all places and times. God's ways are greater than our ways: His thoughts more powerful than our thoughts. This gives us courage to speak up for Him in our own times, just as St Paul did in his.

I began my address this morning by speaking about what we have experienced during covid. Now I want to turn to the last part of my address and ask what comes next for us as the Body of Christ in this place?

We have undoubtedly experienced some pruning, some cutting back, in the last 15 months. Pruning and cutting back is intended to stimulate the plant into producing new growth and more fruit. Shall we look for growth in our midst?

I invite you to pause for a moment and to think of what church has meant to you during this time. Has church helped you? How?

Please can I urge you to put into words to your fellow church members today what church has meant to you during this crisis. We Methodists are rather shy of talking about our feelings. So in a moment I am going to ask you to turn to someone and

say to that person how church has helped you. If you are by yourself, say it out loud, or ring up a Christian friend and tell him or her. This is a safe space. So be bold and speak up.

First let's have a minute or two in silence to collect our thoughts. Has church helped you in this last 15 months?

Now please get into groups and talk and listen to one another.

Well done! This is important, because if we know what we have learnt as a church in the last 15 months, then we know that we have good news to share.

As covid recedes, and we all feel safer, then we will be organising events to welcome people back to church. So we want to be equipped to share how church helps us and to invite friends and family to come with us.

Have you tried to explain to anyone recently why you follow Christ? It's not an easy thing to do. Pray about it first, rehearse the words if that helps you, and wait for the right moment.

We all need help to do this. In his letters, St Paul asks several times for churches to pray that he will have courage to speak out about his faith. We need to build each other up. So that's why I have asked you to share something of your faith today, in a safe space, to give you practice and confidence.

Remember that our God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. With His help we will go forward in faith to live and work for His praise and glory. Amen.

Let us affirm our faith as we sing our next hymn

**StF 67: This, this is the God we adore,
 Our faithful, unchangeable friend, 2vv**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1Ume0o-Blg>

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 in this uncertain time. Give wisdom to our leaders as they make difficult decisions. May we be respectful of other people's safety as we learn to live with the new covid rules

**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 final hymn is Charles Wesley's great hymn to the fellowship we find together in church

**StF 608: All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,**

6vv

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u2Qhk8zl7Jo>

Closing Prayers

Let us repose, Good Shepherd, in your presence;
walk in your path,
enjoy your safety,
rejoice in your banquet,
receive your anointing,
drink from your cup and dwell in your house,
now and for ever. **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