

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 15

LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent? Who may live on your holy mountain?
The one whose walk is blameless, who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from their heart;

whose tongue utters no slander, who does no wrong to a neighbour, and casts no slur on others;

who despises a vile person but honours those who fear the LORD; who keeps an oath even when it hurts, and does not change their mind;

who lends money to the poor without interest; who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

Whoever does these things will never be shaken.

Hymn StF 91 The God of Abraham praise

The God of Abraham praise,
Who reigns enthroned above,
Ancient of everlasting days,
and God of love.

Jehovah! Great I AM!

By earth and heaven confessed;

I bow and bless the sacred name

forever blessed.

He by Himself hath sworn,

I on His oath depend:

I shall, on eagles' wings upborne,
to heaven ascend;

I shall behold His face,

I shall His power adore,

And sing the wonders of His grace
forever more.

The God who reigns on high
The great archangels sing;
And, holy, holy, holy, cry,
Almighty King.
Who was and is the same,
And ever more shall be;
Jehovah, Father, Great I AM,
we worship Thee.

Before the Saviour's face
The ransomed nations bow;
O'erwhelmed at His almighty grace,
forever new:
He shows His prints of love,
They kindle to a flame,
And sound through all the worlds above
the slaughtered Lamb.

The whole triumphant host
Give thanks to God on high;
Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!
They ever cry.
Hail, Abraham's God, and mine!
I join the heavenly throng;
All might and majesty are Thine,
in endless song.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKAIWQpbSH8>

Opening Prayers & Community Prayer

Almighty God,
Lord of heaven and earth,
ruler of space and time,
creator of all that is and has been and shall be,
we acknowledge your goodness,
marvel at your love
and rejoice in your grace.
You are greater than we can ever begin to imagine,
higher than our highest thoughts
always faithful,
always looking to bless,
always ready to forgive and forget.
In awe, we bring you our praise.
Indebted, we give you our thanks.

In celebration, we offer our worship.
To you be glory and honour,
acclaim and adoration,
now and for evermore.

Amen.

Gracious God,
help us to see those things in our lives that are not as they should be.
Forgive whatever obscures, corrupts or undermines our faith.
Help us to recognise everything that despoils our discipleship
thoughts, words and deeds that we should have discarded long since;
weaknesses and faults that have no further place within us
and teach us to dispose of such things before they dispose of us.

Amen.

Community prayers

Reading Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Now, Israel, hear the decrees and laws I am about to teach you. Follow them so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you.

Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them.

Reading James 1:17-27

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like someone who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at

himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do. Those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Hymn StF 501 Help us, O Lord, to learn the truths your word imparts.

Help us, O Lord, to learn
the truths your word imparts,
to study that your laws may be
inscribed upon our hearts.

Help us, O Lord, to live
the faith which we proclaim,
that all our thoughts and words and deeds
may glorify your name.

Help us, O Lord, to teach
the beauty of your ways,
that all who seek may find the Christ
and make a life of praise.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cepu3n3tuzQ>

Reading Mark 7:1-23

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, "Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?" He replied, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." And he continued, "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions! For Moses said, 'Honour your father and mother,' and, 'Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say that if anyone declares

that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that."

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable. "Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.) He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person."

Address "Rules? What rules?"

Mark's gospel has been called a Passion story with a long introduction. Other commentators have remarked on how one story rushes on to another. When we looked at Mark during Bible month I spoke then about the way that the gospel ends abruptly and that later editors felt it necessary to add an "a proper ending". All of this, together with the fact that it's the shortest gospel and was the first to be written might lead you to an impression that it was a rushed job. But this would be to do him a disservice, because Mark is actually quite carefully put together, it's not just a jumble of tales. After a brief introduction we have Mark introducing Jesus with what amounts to a mission statement in Mark chapter 1 and verse 15:

"The kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news".

Mark then goes on to divide his gospel into three sections. In the first he concentrates on Jesus' signs of power and authority by a number of miracles and healings. In the second he concentrates on Jesus' teaching of the disciples, and the third is the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Between these sections there are turning point passages. So between Jesus' demonstrations of power and his teaching of the disciples comes the incident on the road to see Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked his disciples "who do people say that I am?", and then puts the same question to his disciples after which Peter acknowledges him as Messiah. Between the second part of teaching, and the Passion narrative comes the key turning point of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem and Jesus' cleansing the Temple in Mark chapter 11.

The passage that we read this morning is part of that first section of Mark's gospel, but it's one in which he introduces for the first time the conflict that Jesus had with

the Pharisees. Given that a conspiracy of Pharisees and Sadducees will eventually be responsible for his death, this is a way of alerting us at an early stage as to what will come. But it's much more than that. It is a mini turning point in its own right. The Pharisees have become alarmed at the way that Jesus' increasing popularity, and they are looking to find fault. They suggest that Jesus and his disciples are breaking the Jewish Law. Now we have seen from the passage that we read in Deuteronomy how the giving of the Law by Moses was binding on the Jews for all time – it is to be passed down through the generations to your “children's children”. So, from the Pharisees point of view, if they can show that Jesus and his disciples are breaking the Law they undermine his ministry and his authority with the people – even though the signs that he has been doing – like the feeding of the five thousand, walking on water, and multiple healings of the common people and sinners – would indicate that his authority comes from God.

The point that they trip Jesus and his disciples up on is not washing their hands before a meal. Mark, writing to a Greek audience, has to explain how the Jews regard washing as essential to prevent impurity and being “unclean”. Now in recent times we've had quite a lot of advice and information about washing hands. For the most part I think we have been more diligent in making sure that we do wash hands after going to the toilet, before eating food, or handling things that others will touch. But I do wonder whether all of us go as far as the advice of the NHS on hand washing which involves nine separate steps, with at least 20 seconds of active hand washing while you hum happy birthday twice. I guess that most of us wash our hands quite thoroughly, but don't go as far as that. We are still quite careful to follow advice about cleaning surfaces that others might touch, even though current scientific evidence shows that a lot of that is actually unnecessary. So imagine how you might feel if some overzealous enthusiast for hand washing and surface cleaning nagged at you all the time, criticised you for your current practice, described you as impure or unclean, and generally despised you as being of poor moral character. You might feel a bit peeved. But that is just the attitude that Pharisees adopted to the keeping of the Law. Jesus offended them by dealing with common people who were sinners, and now it was clear from what had happened that he had no regard for the Law of Moses.

Jesus gives them short shrift. He calls them hypocrites and quotes from the prophet Isaiah how people like them court popularity with the people by welcoming Jesus, but in their hearts they want to trip him up and destroy him. He then point out to them that in fact the washing of hands is not in the Law of Moses, and indeed you will look hard to find it anywhere in the Bible. The Jewish practice about hand washing with written down in the Mishnah, a collection of interpretations and guidance for practical living based on the Law and taught by various rabbis. It is tradition, not Law. The best modern example that I can think of is the way in which the imams of Islam have codified a number of teachings and fatwas, applying the teaching of the Koran to contemporary life. In some cases the teaching of the imams can give a liberal and modern interpretation to Islam, in other cases – such as we are seeing in

Afghanistan, or in Iran – the interpretation is restricted, fundamentalist, and has the potential for division, conflict, and injustice. The Pharisees would definitely have been in the latter camp, and would consider themselves to be religiously “holier than thou” in comparison to the common people.

In the set text for this morning the key passages in Mark chapter 7 are split up into two or three sections which are put together to give the overall flavour of what Jesus was saying to the Pharisees. Unfortunately it omits some of the important detail in the passage. And what follows is one of the bits that it omits. For Jesus goes on to say that the Pharisees manipulate the Law for their own purposes. There is definitely in the Law the commandment to honour your parents, but Pharisees used the trick of declaring their possessions “Corban” – that is devoting them as an offering to God – in order to avoid the necessity of using their wealth to support their parents. The Pharisees manipulated religious piety for their own purposes.

Jesus ends this argument with the Pharisees in front of the crowd by pointing out that you are not made unclean by anything that is external to you, only by what comes from your own heart, from within you. This statement would have shocked the Pharisees, and many observant Jews who were used to the idea that they were made righteous in God’s sight by following the Law. So, unsurprisingly, the disciples when they are alone with Jesus ask if he was being serious when he suggested that following the requirements of the Law did not make somebody righteous with God, it was only what came from within that could make someone righteous. Jesus replies by giving them a fairly graphic example saying that nothing that you eat can make you impure because it goes through you and is finally discharged into the public sewer. All of the evil that people do comes from within them, not from outside. And he reinforces this attitude to the Law by continuing to demonstrate his authority from God by acts of power, but whilst the last three acts of power – the feeding of the five thousand, walking on water, and healing – have been towards the Jewish crowd, the next three – the healing of the Syro Phoenician woman’s possessed daughter, the healing of the deaf and mute man, and the feeding of the four thousand are all directed to Gentiles. The Pharisees would have been outraged, since Jesus is indicating that God’s love and kingdom are equally applicable to Jew and Gentile, and that therefore the Jewish observance of the Law grants them no special privilege – which would fly in the face of what every observant Jew believed to be the purpose of God since they were God’s “chosen people”.

This question about the status of the Jewish Law was to become one of the key issues for the emerging Christian Church. When the Church, following Jesus’ extension of his ministry towards the Gentiles began to admit Gentiles in their own right, an argument arose as to whether or not these newly baptised Christians, who have been validated by the receiving of the Holy Spirit, should follow the Jewish Law. Paul, as apostle to the Gentiles, was clearly of the view that they did not. However his ministry to the churches he founded was often undermined by Jewish Christians who maintained that the new converts had to follow the Jewish Law – after all it had been

ordained by God through Moses. Paul's letter to the Romans is a detailed argument in which he does not dismiss the value of the Jewish Law, but says that that value is limited and has been superseded by the grace of God shown in the life and teaching of Jesus. Faith in Jesus is what matters, not the keeping of the Law. Similarly he castigates the Galatians when he writes to them because they have been "bewitched" by later Christian teachers into believing that they must follow the Jewish Law in all respects. Referring to them as "stupid Galatians" he goes so far as to suggest that if they insist on being circumcised that he hopes "the knife slips".

But the wider question that Paul also has to answer is the criticism that under the new covenant brought about by Jesus, people are free to do what they like provided they have faith. The liberty they have from the Jewish Law will result in the license to behave in any way they want. Paul refutes this, and so in his way does James in his letter. James makes it clear that belief must result in appropriate behaviour. Although writing to Jewish Christians who are living in communities across the Mediterranean, he pleads with them not to conform to the norms of behaviour that they see around them, but to conform to the teaching that they have received and the word of God. They are to have a right appreciation of themselves, not persuade themselves that simply following religious tradition is enough. Such shallow faith is like somebody who looks in a mirror and then forgets what they look like. Instead they should treat the word of God as "perfect law that gives freedom" and should seek to deepen that faith in themselves. They should not only be careful what they say is in line with what they profess to believe, they should also make sure that what they do is also in line with what they profess to believe.

It has been said that the advice that James gives is very much within the Jewish tradition, and could be taken as giving the impression that an individual is made righteous by what they do. Martin Luther could not abide this interpretation of James, because it contradicted his strongly held view that Christian salvation only came through the grace of God, and not by following the tradition of the Mediaeval Church which placed emphasis on charity, acts of penitence, and strict observance of the rites and worship of the church. He called the Letter of James "a right strawy epistle", and in the Bible that he translated would have omitted it completely as being non-Christian. However there is a fundamental truth in what James is saying. It is in line with Jesus's view of the attitude of the Pharisees. And it is something that we still find today.

We all have different attitudes to rules. Some feel comforted by knowing what it is they have to do and by doing it faithfully. Others feel that rules can sometimes be over restrictive and not allow them the freedom to express themselves as they would wish. The philosopher Isaiah Berlin proposed that people could be divided into two groups who he called hedgehogs and foxes. Hedgehogs were people who held on firmly to a particular belief or understanding. If that belief was threatened they became very defensive and would "die in a ditch" to oppose any criticism of it. They rolled up and presented barrier of spines to any questioning of their belief like a

hedgehog. Foxes, Berlin suggested, were people who held their beliefs quite lightly and in the face of new evidence, or criticism, were quite prepared to modify their ideas and adopt new thinking. He didn't think that hedgehogs were better than foxes or vice versa. Each had the dangers. Hedgehogs could cling to discredited ideas often very aggressively, whilst foxes were open to the accusation they didn't have a firm belief in anything.

So it is with the expression of Christian faith. Some people feel happiest if someone will tell them what is demanded of them and set out to do their very best to achieve the standards set. Others feel that under the freedom of the Spirit they should be able to explore new ways to express their faith. Both of these have dangers – the lovers of rules may find that they fall into the Pharisee trap of fundamentalism feeling themselves to be morally superior to others, those who love freedom may find that they are unduly influenced by fashion and contemporary thought and lose their grip on the fundamentals of faith. Holding the two in tension, as we are bound to do can be hard. But it is fundamentally what we need to do if we are to stay together as people of faith. And as James tells us we need to respect the hedgehogs if we are a fox, and vice versa.

Prayer

Gracious God,
teach us your way,
and help us to learn more of your love.
Grow in us,
that we may grow in you.
Amen.

Hymn StF 545 Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be thou my vision, O ruler of all.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OhTJZcR1VQ>

Prayers of Intercession

Our God is the source of all holiness;
with the needs of the Church and the world
close to our hearts,
let us pray to the only one
who can renew and redeem.

Father, we are all too aware of our temptation
to place our trust in rules and traditions,
and we long for you to release in the Church
such a desire to serve the living God
that nothing is allowed to get in the way of that.

Silence

Into your hands, O Lord:
we commit the future.

Father, we recognise in ourselves
the universal dangerous wants and cravings
which are cultivated because they make money.
Give us universally such a loathing of evil
that there is international co-operation
and individual responsibility in fighting it
and building one another up in love.

Silence

Into your hands, O Lord:
we commit the future.

Father, may our homes, schools and churches
reflect and engender the Godly values
of mutual care, respect and responsibility,
of integrity and forgiveness.

Silence

Into your hands, O Lord:
we commit the future.

Father, we stand alongside all who are hurting
in body, mind or spirit;
all who need courage, support or practical help.
Make us willing to become
part of your answer to our prayers for them.

Silence

Into your hands, O Lord:
we commit the future.

Father, as Lord of both time and eternity,
we commit to your keeping
those who have died to this life;
that, freed from all pain, and forgiven,
they may live in the peace and joy of heaven.

Silence

Into your hands, O Lord:
we commit the future.

Father, write your Law of love on our hearts
and send us glowing with thankfulness
through the week ahead.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour 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 477 Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart

Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,
*teach me to move in the power of your Spirit,
teach me to walk in the light of your presence,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.*

*Teach me to love with your heart of compassion,
teach me to trust in the word of your promise,
teach me to hope in the day of your coming,
teach me to dance to the beat of your heart.*

You wrote the rhythm of life,
created heaven and earth,
in you is joy without measure.
So, like a child in your sight,
I dance to see your delight,
for I was made for your pleasure,
pleasure.

Let all my movements express
a heart that loves to say 'yes',
a will that leaps to obey you.
Let all my energy blaze
to see the joy in your face;
let my whole being praise you,
praise you.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMeAyiZ1niE>

Blessing

Father God,
we have drawn aside from the world;
help us now to return and live out our faith within it.
We have heard your word;
help us now to put it into practice.
We have stood in your presence;
help us now to make you known.
We have received your mercy;
help us now to forgive others.
We have heard again your call;
help us now to answer.
We have offered our worship;
help us now to praise you in our daily lives.
Go with us,
and help us to walk faithfully with you.
Amen.