

Morning Worship for Sunday 14 march 2021

from the United Reformed Churches at Morpeth,
Widdrington and Gt. Bavington

Opening Words:

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good: his love endures forever." Psalm 107:1

Welcome to our worship wherever you may be as you join with us in this service. God is here. We come to hear God's word for us, and today we celebrate Mothering Sunday and we look towards Easter with our gospel reading which includes perhaps the most famous verse of the gospel:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16

Hymn: God of Eve and God of Mary

God of Eve and God of Mary,
God of love and mother-earth,
thank you for the ones who with us
shared their life and gave us birth.

As you came to earth in Jesus,
so you come to us today;
you are present in the caring
that prepares us for life's way.

Thank you that the Church, our Mother,
gives us bread and fills our cup,
and the comfort of the Spirit
warms our hearts and lifts us up.

Thank you for belonging, shelter,
bonds of friendship, ties of blood,
and for those who have no children,
yet are parents under God.

God of Eve and God of Mary,
Christ our brother, human Son,
Spirit, caring like a Mother,
take our love and make us one!

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Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus,
We come to you and offer you our praise and thanksgiving
for you are good, and you offer us life and love in abundance.
Thank you for this free gift which is ours.

As we look towards the cross and to Easter,

we raise you up, just as you were raised on that cross,
we glorify you, just as you glorified the Father by doing his will,
we love you, just as you love us.

As we come to worship today we pray that we may be reminded of that love.

The love for the world that led to those cruel hours on the cross,
the love for the world that rose from the grave on Easter day and renewed the world, and restored the relationship between us and God.

A relationship like that of parent and child,
and one which we can celebrate as we think of those in our lives
who have embodied that relationship and love for us.

As we come together today,
each from our own situations,
each with our own experiences,
each filled with our own regrets and failures,
each looking to be accepted and loved;
Speak to us through your word,
Let us hear words of assurance and encouragement,
Let us hear words of comfort and peace
Let us hear words of forgiveness and love.

In Jesus name we pray
AMEN

Reading: John 3: 14-21

Reading: Ephesians 2: 1-10

Hymn: God with us: Creator, Father

God with us: Creator, Father
bringing everything to birth;
Mother of the whole creation,
fire of stars and life of earth:
down the countless years composing,
from the earth's evolving night,
love's response to love, and forming
mind and soul to seek your light.

God with us: Redeemer, Brother,
Friend for ever at our side,
here, in flesh, you walked among us.
taking up your cross, you died.
Crucified, despised, rejected,
Perfect Love, who shared our shame,
streaming from the cross, your judgement,
full of mercy, clears our name.

God with us: Unwearied Spirit,
from the birth of time and space,
surging through unconscious being,

joyful, Life-Creating Grace:
through the centuries you find us;
you, as God, inspire our prayer;
Life and Power at work within us,
Love for ever, everywhere!

God, Transcendent, far beyond us,
closest Friend, unailing Guide:
through the ages, wronged, affronted,
in your poor, still crucified!
God with us: convict, forgive us;
by your holy love destroy
all that hinders peace and justice:
fill this aching world with joy!

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Reading: Numbers 21:4-9

It for many of us, perhaps, been a while since we have been on a long journey. It seems a long time since we have been able to load up the car, and the whole family pile in, and then go on a trip far enough that we have to stay overnight. The excitement of where it is we are going, and what we will be doing when we get there, and lots of activities to keep us busy on the journey.

Its such a while since we have been able to do that, that perhaps I have forgotten the reality of those family trips. Because the reality is that we are all cramped in the car with bags at our feet and no room to stretch out. The kids are bored, and we have to stop every now and then for toilet breaks because someone didn't "go" before we set off. And it's never very far into the journey until Noah starts to ask "Are we there yet!"

In this reading from the Old Testament, the Israelites are acting a little like Noah on those road trips. Their trip , through the wilderness is taking a little longer than expected. Having found out that Canaan cannot be entered from the nearest point, the people of Israel have had to make a detour to find an easier and safer route in which to enter Canaan.

The Israelites are acting like impatient children who have been on a road trip for far too long. Hunger and exhaustion have taken a toll on them. They are whining. In their wilderness wanderings, they have lost their bearings in reality.

Despite the fact that God has delivered them time after time on their journey to the Promised Land, they yet again think they are going to die. Although God has never let them starve to death, they complain and whine about what they are lacking. Although they

have been provided bread from heaven, they are now complaining that they are sick of the sight of manna.

The Israelites have perhaps forgotten the reality of the past. They have forgotten that they have been delivered from slavery. They have lost sight of the fact that with each step they are closer and closer to the Promised Land. They have taken their eyes off God as their provider and Moses their leader. They focus only on their own earthly needs. They are whining.

This passage perhaps resonates with us during this time we have spent in lockdown, looking to the time when we will be able to live freely again. We can also think about this passage in terms of our own spiritual journeys through lent.

Today is the fourth Sunday in Lent. We have been focusing on our shortcomings and frailties for several weeks now, we have denied ourselves treats, we have called ourselves to focus on what God wants and not on what we want. We are continuing to strengthen our efforts to be more like Christ. And now Easter Sunday is on the horizon, but we can't crack open the Easter Eggs just yet. It is easy at this point to look at the spiritual journey ahead and ask, just as Noah does: "Are we there yet?"

We are reminded that not all journeys we make are exciting and full of joy. When we journey we may have to endure times of being uncomfortable, times of being hungry and thirsty, times when we just hope the journey will be over and we can get on with things. Its important then as we journey to be encouraged, to be reminded that God travels with us in both good times and bad, and to be reminded that our journeying will not go on forever and we will arrive finally at our destination.

This is important to us at this time during Lent, when we are tempted to skip forward to the joy of Easter. It is vitally important to us too at this time during lockdown. When we all feel tempted to rush ahead to when lockdown and the restrictions are over. It is interesting that our plan out of lockdown is called a roadmap. It reminds us of the journey and helps us to see what lies ahead and reminds us we are not there yet. We need to be patient, and show restraint, and that we are not there yet and to pay attention instead to the road before us that is preparing us for what lies ahead.

The journey of the Israelites reminds us that our journey through life is not always easy. There are good times and bad. But during the bad times, we should not be distracted and think that God is not there, but instead to turn our focus and attention to him more,

to remind ourselves of times he has helped us in the past and to be assured that he remains with us to help us.

What strikes me in this passage is that not only have to suffer hunger, and thirst and the endless travelling – but now it seems they have a problem with poisonous snakes. Snakes sent themselves by God to teach those Israelites a lesson in gratitude.

And when the Israelites realise that they have been ungrateful toward God, and go to Moses to ask God to call off the poisonous snakes, God doesn't get rid of them. Instead he asks Moses to create some sort of vaccine that will stop people from dying from the snake bites. Its no ordinary vaccine. Strangely the vaccine is a bronze sculpture of a snake on a pole.

It seems on the face of it, some sort of magical totem that might cure the people. But this bronze snake on a pole is more symbolic than magical. Just as the Covid vaccine has been made to mimic the covid virus and help the body to fight against it. So the cure for the snakes that are attacking the people and causing them to die is a snake. This cure for this punishment of snakes that has come from God is this bronze snake that they are called to look at to confront their sin and its result.

When Moses lifts this Bronze snake on a pole – the Israelites both see their sin and the cause of their punishment, but they also see God's grace and the way that he loves and heals them. Here the Israelites see both their sin, and the healing grace of God, in tandem.

And we can see in this something of the meaning of the cross on which Christ is lifted in just a few weeks time. Jesus identified himself as the vaccine to the snakebite of mortality brought about by sin. It was a snake that caused Adam and Eve to sin in the very start of the story of God's creation, and God sends Jesus to be the cure for this once and for all. By looking at the Jesus on the Cross, lifted up and dying for our sin, we see the depth of our fall, the fate we deserve and the grace that we receive through God by his healing.

P J Wilson says "The simple equation endures; the cure for snakes is a snake, the cure for human life is one mans life, the cure for death is death. Nothing less will do."

Today is Mothering Sunday, and one that has been celebrated in the church since the middle ages. It

comes on the Sunday half way through Lent and was alternatively called "Refreshment Sunday" and it was a day of respite from fasting halfway through the penitential season of Lent. So if you have given up anything for Lent, this Sunday especially would be one in which you could take a break and enjoy yourself.

The origins of this tradition are vague, but it is known that on this Sunday the readings for the day would be from Isaiah 66 and from Psalm 122.

The Isaiah verses that would have been read are :
"Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love here, rejoice greatly with her, all you who mourn over her. For you will feed and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance."

The Psalm verses is "I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord"

It was perhaps because of these passages, that this Sunday became a Sunday when people would return to the Mother Church – the church they were baptised in, or the church they were brought up in, or their family church – whichever Church might be regarded as their Mother Church. On this Sunday people would go 'a-mothering' and would sometimes make a considerable journey to return to their mother church.

Later on, servants and domestic staff would be given the day off in order to allow them to return home. Churches would be full of re-united families, and you can see how it might be that Mothering Sunday became a time to celebrate families and mothers in particular. And so Mother's Day and Mothering Sunday become intertwined.

I love the idea of the original idea of "Refreshment Sunday". That this would be a Sunday, half way through the journey of Lent, when people would stop to be spiritually refreshed, feeding off their Mother Church and being nourished in this way.

As we approach Easter and Holy Week, as we suffer and whine on this our journey through Lent, we are invited to stop and be spiritually refreshed. We are called to look upon the Cross in order to refocus us on the journey ahead. This is the image that helps us focus our hearts and souls in our Lenten experience.

We know the Israelites eventually make it to the Promised Land because our God keeps his promises. We know this Lenten journey will come to a close in a couple of weeks and that we will celebrate a risen Christ on Easter Sunday but not before we travel through the crucifixion on Good Friday.

We know too that lockdown will one day soon come to an end, but now is not the right time, we are “not there yet”.

We are invited to be refreshed.

To rejoice in the love that is displayed to us by Christ being lifted on the Cross, and the promise of the healing and new life that this offers to us.

To remember how our faith has sustained us in the past, and to be spiritually nourished again.

To be encouraged that God has not forgotten us, but that our journey is not yet over, and we are “not there yet”.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

On this Mothering Sunday, when much attention is paid to families, we offer our prayers today for all those who struggle and find today difficult.

We pray for those who have no home, and for those whom family life is a distant memory, or an unrealised dream.

We pray for one parent families who, with no-one to share responsibilities, each day struggle to cope.

We pray for homes that are under strain and where relationships have gone badly wrong. We pray for those for whom separation are seen as the only way ahead.

We pray for those who family life is stained by disappointment and despair. We pray for those who long to be parents, but have found this not to be possible. We pray for those who feel excluded by our family oriented society and churches. We pray for those who weep for children they have lost, and those who weep for children they are losing, to drink and drugs and lives of crime.

We pray for all those for whom Mothering Sunday is a day of sadness and dread, for those for whom it is a day to avoid or to just get through. We pray for those who have lost homes and family, and those who have no happy memories.

On this day, we give thanks for our place in God's family, that with all its faults is still meant to be like a mother

or father to us, to lead us on this journey of faith.

We pray as we journey together that we might support and encourage one another, in our discipleship and in our love and concern for one another.

That we might nourish one another, and find ways to lead others to the cross, and to receive the life and healing it offers.

May the risen Christ, who through the power of the Holy Spirit still changes lives be the source of our hope and the promise of glory. AMEN

Hymn: For the beauty of the earth

For the beauty of the earth,
for the beauty of the skies,
for the love which from our birth
over and around us lies:
*Gracious God to thee we raise
this our sacrifice of praise.*

For the beauty of each hour
of the day and of the night,
hill and vale, and tree and flower,
sun and moon, and stars of light:

For the joy of ear and eye,
for the heart and mind's delight,
for the mystic harmony
linking sense to sound and sight:

For the joy of human love
brother, sister, parent, child,
friends on earth, and friends above;
for all gentle thoughts and mild:

For each perfect gift of thine
to our race so freely given,
graces human and divine,
flowers of earth and buds of heaven:

For thy people, evermore
lifting holy hands above,
offering up on every shore
their pure sacrifice of love:
*Gracious God to thee we raise
this our sacrifice of praise.*

F.S.Pierpoint

Blessing