

Morning Worship for 21 March 2021

From the United Reformed Church at Morpeth, Widdrington and Gt. Bavington.

Opening Words

Look upon us, O Lord,
**and let all the darkness of our souls
vanish before the beams of Your brightness.**
Fill us with holy love,
and open to us the treasures of Your wisdom.
All our desire is known to You,
**o perfect what You have begun,
and what Your Spirit has awakened us to ask.**
We seek Your face,
turn Your face unto us and show us Your glory.
**Only then will our longing be satisfied,
and our peace shall be perfect.**

Amen

*(Adapted from a prayer attributed to Saint Augustine
(354- 430AD)*

Hymn: O love that wilt not let me go

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee.
I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

O Light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee.
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee.
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee.
I lay in dust, life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red,
life that shall endless be.

George Matheson

Prayer

As we emerge from darkness of the night
into the light of the morning sun,

we thank you God for this new day:
for its promise and its potential,
for the work that it brings
and for the relaxation it allows,
for the people we might encounter
and the solitude we might enjoy,
for the singing of the birds
and the whisper of the trees,
for the new life springing from the ground
and for the memories of that which has ended.

As we gather to worship you today,
and listen to your word in scripture:
we ponder the seed that falls to the ground,
and the new life that grows from it.
We see how this pattern of dying and living
is echoed through your creation,
and through the saving action of the Easter cross.
We commit ourselves to your purpose,
as we offer to you our lives today,
that in giving ourselves over to death
we might rise again to new life in you.

As we go about our living this week,
and encounter those you direct us towards:
may we be open to the sights and sounds
of your creative action among us,
may we listen and hear those
who are in need and cry out for help,
may we speak words of love and peace
to those who are in turmoil,
may we offer our hands and feet
to do your work and walk your way.

May this new life to which we rise
bring fulfilment and renewal
not only to ourselves,
but to the world around us.
AMEN

Reading Jeremiah 31:31-34

Video Psalm 51

Words of forgiveness

Our Lord Jesus Christ
died because of our sin,
but in rising to new life,
restores our relationship with God.
You are loved.
You are forgiven.
You are God's people.
Amen

Hymn: As the deer pants for the water

As the deer pants for the water,
So my soul longs after You.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship You.
*You alone are my strength, my shield,
To You alone may my spirit yield.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship You.*

I want You more than gold or silver,
Only You can satisfy.
You alone are the real joy-giver
And the apple of my eye.
You alone are....

You're my Friend and You are my Brother,
Even though You are a King.
I love You more than any other,
So much more than anything.
So much more than anything.
You alone are

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Reading: John 12: 20-33

Sermon

The setting for this reading comes strangely after the events of Palm Sunday that we celebrate next week. In John's gospel Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, and had now attracted a large crowd of Jews who were following Jesus. The Pharisees decided that Jesus was becoming too popular and started to make plans together to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.

However, after Jesus entry into Jerusalem, the swell of popularity for Jesus was such that the Pharisees had to re-think their plans. They say to one another, "See this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!"

Today's reading is a turning point in John's gospel, and the remaining chapters focus on Jesus' last words to the disciples and the events leading to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What seems to mark this turning point in the gospel is the Greeks who come seeking Jesus. For it becomes clear that Jesus now has not just a ministry to the Jews, but to the Gentiles too. It is when the Greeks come seeking Jesus and his teaching, that Jesus declares "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified"

Jesus recognises perhaps recognises that it is through this death, in which he will be lifted up from the earth so as to draw all people to himself. It is through his death, that the new life of the gospel is to come.

I can't help to read this text, without being reminded of a wonderful story by Trevor Dennis that was published in the URC Prayer Handbook back in 2001, it was called simply "The Sunflower"

All about was desolation. The stale, stinking canal, the old Victorian tenements, the streets with the rubbish of last month still piled in the gutters, the lamp-posts broken. Some of the flats were all boarded up, others had their windows broken, all, or nearly all, looked sad, tired and as if they should have been pulled down years ago. There are many places like it and worse.

At the end of Jubilee Street the desolation was complete. For thirty years a bomb site had been there....it was covered with broken pieces of masonry and the inevitable litter...It defeated even the most vigorous and persistent of weeds. Nothing grew there until one autumn a seed took root. The following spring nobody noticed the plant for several weeks, but in the end you cannot miss a sunflower. There it stood, five or six feet tall, with its heavy golden head. When the sun was out, its yellow was so intense that most people would shield their eyes against it but on dull days it shone, almost as powerfully as if a strange light of its own burned within its petals. It caused quite a stir. Most of the local people had never seen a sunflower and if they had, they had not seen one quite like that. They would gather around in small groups, looking at it, wondering what to do with it. There were a few who were cheered by its beauty. Of those, some were changed by it. Most people, however, were merely bewildered. They did not know what to make of the flower.

So they just left it alone and thought they would get used to it. But they did not. It was so conspicuous. It showed up the drabness, the desolation, all around for what it was: empty, ugly, dead. It became intolerable. You must not blame them. You or I would have done the same, feeling as they did. One evening they went out in a great crowd to the bomb site and they trampled on that sunflower and beat it to the ground, and crushed its petals till they were but a stain which the dust soon covered. They went away in silence, their job done.

Yet they destroyed that plant in high summer, when its flower was full of ripe seed. In their dance of death they scattered that seed over the entire bomb site and buried some of it in the ground. So it was the next

spring the bomb site at the end of Jubilee Street was covered with sunflowers.

Like that sunflower, Jesus shone with light. Almost dazzling to those who looked upon it. Jesus says in our gospel reading today "You are going to have the light a little while longer. Walk while you have the light. Put your trust in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of the light."

But the people did not know how to react to the light that appeared among them. Jesus certainly caused a stir among the people. People gathered around him in small groups wondering what this was, and what to do with what Jesus was teaching. A few cheered his beauty, but most were bewildered.

In the end Jesus' light just highlighted more clearly for people the darkness around them. Jesus shone a light and people saw all too clearly the drabness and desolation around them. So much so, that it became intolerable.

This story of the Sunflower is in a way a parable of the gospel. Jesus says to his followers that "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." This is the way that Jesus sees reflected in God's purpose for him, and tells his followers that they too should follow that pattern in their own discipleship.

We are not called to physically die in order to experience this new life. From reading the gospels and the letters of Paul, this physical life what we live is valued just as much as the eternal life we might experience after death. The new life we are called to begins now, here on earth, and not just after we die. Rather than, we are called to die to this earthly life and rise to a new life as citizens of God's Kingdom here on earth.

That means dying to our earthly life, with all its stresses and anxieties, its ugliness and desolation, and instead living the new life that is promised as children of the light. We are to be born not just of the water, that breaks as a sign of our natural birth, but to be born of the Spirit which is a sign of our spiritual birth. We are all to be born again Christians as Jesus encourages Nicodemus in that night-time conversation.

During this season of Lent, we are called to take stock of our lives and to give up all that is not good for us, and keeps us from God. We are called during this Easter journey, to follow in the same way, and to put to death on the cross all those things in our life that are not life giving. On that cross we place all our sin, all that keeps us distant from God, so that through

their death, we might receive the new life that God offers to us.

What is it for you, that you need to let go of? What is it that is in your life that is empty and ugly and dead?

Are you ready to let go of it? Just silently now, just take that thing and offer it to God. Ask him to take it from you. So that you might be ready to receive instead what he has to offer.

When we discussed this passage at one of our Lent Course sessions, it was pointed out to me that the seed that is planted is not dead, but just dormant.. The seeds that lie in the ground, are full of life, just waiting to emerge when the Spring sun comes. During that time within the ground, they are receiving all that they need in order for that growth to take place. They take in water which causes the seed to swell and water to reach the embryo and for life to begin. The seed takes in oxygen from the air. And slowly and surely new life emerges, pushing up through the ground, and springing into life.

We might recognise this state of dormancy, as we continue in lockdown. Like the seed hidden in the ground, we too are receiving all that we need for life to emerge. This time is not wasted, but a crucial part of the process. We take in all that we need so that when the time is right we are ready and able to spring into life.

We look forward in hope during this time of Lent, to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Easter. We prepare ourselves by letting go, sacrificing on the cross, all those things in our lives that are not life-giving. And we prepare ourselves for waking to this new life that is available to us through faith.

To finish, I share with you a poem called simply "Hope"

*Oh, tiny seed buried deep in the earth
lying lifeless, deep down in your grave,
consumed by the dark, abandoned and helpless
unable to seek the light that you crave.*

*This is your world into which you have been cast
this is your lot, and this where you stay,
dormant and still, anticipating, expectant,
thirsting to breathe the fresh air of day.*

*All light is extinguished in your tiny prison
surrounded by the debris, and soil of this hell,
suffocating, constricting, and crushing against
your only protection, your hard outer shell.*

*But with you, in the dark, is goodness and richness
silently seeping to the warmth of within,
tender and slow, infiltrating unseen,
nature allows new life to begin.*

*From your soul is a stirring of a familiar feeling
growing in strength, day after day,
increasing and pulsing, forcing, surging,
until the hard outer husk of your life breaks away.*

*Released from your prison you are free to become
that which you were made and created to be,
pushing and driving, through the soil of the earth
unrelenting, persistent until you are free.*

*Oh, tiny seed buried deep in my heart
given up for dead in this dark world of sin,
I long for you to break from your prison
and break forth into life
from your deep grave within.*

Prayers of Intercession

We pray together, for all those for whom death is a reality.

We pray for those who have lost loved ones and struggle to cope with the loss that they face.

We pray for those who have lost jobs and purpose in life.

We pray for those who are in relationships that are violent and without love.

We pray for those who have lost faith and hope and see no value to life.

We pray for those known to us who are in need of our prayers today....

Today, Lord, we pray that in all these situations new life might come.
Shine your light into their darkness, that they may see the promise and hope which you offer.
Bring light and air, so that they may breathe deeply, and be filled with new life.

And we pray for ourselves,
in our dormancy,
feed us with the nourishment we need,
and bring your word to life in.
Help us to put to death all those things that limit our existence,
so that we may rise with you
to life in all its fulness.

We offer our prayers today in the name of Jesus Christ,
who taught us to say together...

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: The spirit lives to set us free

The Spirit lives to set us free,
Walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
Walk, walk in the light.

*Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.*

Jesus promised life to all,
Walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by his call,
Walk, walk in the light.

He died in pain on Calvary,
Walk, walk in the light.
To save the lost like you and me,
Walk, walk in the light.

We know his death was not the end,
Walk, walk in the light.
He gave his Spirit to be our friend,
Walk, walk in the light.

By Jesus' love our wounds are healed
Walk, walk in the light.
He gave His Spirit to be our friend,
Walk, walk in the light.

The Spirit lives in you and me,
Walk, walk in the light;
His light will shine for all to see,
Walk, walk in the light.
*Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.*

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