**14th June 2020**

Call to worship

Psalm 100

1Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
2    Worship the Lord with gladness;
    come before him with joyful songs.
3Know that the Lord is God.
    It is he who made us, and we are his[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+100&version=NIV#fen-NIV-15512a)];
    we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

4Enter his gates with thanksgiving
    and his courts with praise;
    give thanks to him and praise his name.
5For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;
    his faithfulness continues through all generations.

HYMN: Praise to the Lord

A gathering prayer

Loving Lord, your grace draws us to your presence;
your peace unites us in your love;
your hope inspires us to praise your glory.
May our worship be worthy of you.
Amen.



A prayer of approach

We come before you, gracious God, just as we are.
We come with our weaknesses and our vulnerabilities.
We come with our fears and apprehensions.
We come with faith and doubt.
We come to offer and receive.
We come to you, the king of love –
in the name of your Son,
and in the power of your Spirit.
Amen.



A prayer of confession

Lord, you have called us to the privilege of service,
but we have failed to serve.
You have given us the blessing of peace,
but we have chosen discord.
You have loved as a shepherd tends his sheep,
but we have strayed from your way.
Forgive us, and show us the path of obedience and faithfulness
that your Son trod.
In his name, we pray.
Amen.



A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

We unite with the whole world in praising you, creator God.
We come before you with gladness and thanksgiving.
We praise your goodness;
we praise your faithfulness;
we praise your tenderness.
We are yours and we worship you.
We bless your name for ever.
Amen.



**Matthew 9.35-10.8**

It’s been a week in which statues have been toppled and reputations of great figures from the past have been questioned in the light of the anti-racist demonstrations following the death of George Floyd a black man who died in Minneapolis after a white police officer knelt on his neck.

Winston Churchill’s statue in Parliament Square was daubed with the words ‘was a racist’– referring to his well-chronicled derogatory views of Indians and black people. A statue of Baden Powell, the founder of the scouts, is being guarded night and day by scouts for fear of being attacked by those who are angry at his racist and homophobic views in the past.

In Bristol, protesters pulled down a statue of prominent 17th Century slave trader, Edward Colston, before later dumping it into the harbour.

Colston has been a source of controversy in the city for many years as he made the majority of his wealth by assisting the transport of African men, women and children into slavery through the Royal African Company. A statue was erected in his honour 120 years ago as he donated large sums of money to help build schools, churches and homes for the poor in Bristol.

The Mayor of Bristol has defended protesters who pulled down the statue of Edward Colston.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Marvin Rees who is a Christian himself and Europe's first directly elected mayor of African heritage said that while he "can't condone criminal damage", he also cannot pretend that "the statue is anything other than an affront" to him and many others. He said that Jesus gives us a great example of protest and action in his response to the sellers and the money changers in the temple courts.

"What does Jesus do?" he said. "He drives them out, not only that - it's premeditated - he goes away, makes a whip and comes back. So, anger is not a problem. Outrage is not a problem. Driving injustice out of our systems is not a problem."

Rees also explained his reasons for not having the statue removed himself prior to the Black Lives Matters protests.

He explained that his focus as mayor has been on the immediate needs of his community and this was not high on his priority list.

"I took office in the middle of Brexit, in the middle of austerity, with a housing crisis with horrific levels of inequality in Bristol. I've got to focus on doing stuff that matters, that makes a difference to people's lives here and now.

"Taking down a statue won't feed people, house people, tackle mental health, domestic violence or any of those issues. So, it wasn't at the top of my list of priorities. My priority has been about tackling poverty right here right now."

We name buildings after people, or put up statues to them, because we respect them. But what if we then discover they did wrong? In what cases should the building be renamed, or the statue be removed?

I read an article by the philosopher, David Edmonds[[2]](#endnote-2). He says:

One approach is to do nothing. The do-nothing advocates say history shouldn't be rewritten. To do so would be a form of censorship. And, they say, it's ridiculous to expect every great historical figure to be blemish-free, to have lived a life of unadulterated purity.

Even those held up as saintly figures, such as Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela, had flaws (Gandhi's attitude to women is excruciating, seen through 21st Century eyes).

So, we're on a slippery slope. If we were to denude Britain of all the statues of dead politicians and soldiers who held a few views we now find problematic, the country would be littered with unoccupied plinths. And what message would it send to contemporary philanthropists? Give generously today, and risk having your reputation trashed tomorrow.

But this "do-nothing" position seems too extreme. Imagine that Goebbels had endowed scholarships to Oxford, like the imperialist Cecil Rhodes. Would anybody seriously claim the Goebbels Scholarships shouldn't be renamed (would anybody want to be a Goebbels Scholar?) or that a Goebbels statue shouldn't be demolished?

Daniel Butt says some sorts of crime or reprehensible behaviour are rightly regarded as so severe that they can't help but contaminate our overall assessment of that person's moral worth.

They are beyond the pale, that are just so wrong that it becomes completely inappropriate to have that kind of person as a role model, to put them on a pedestal and look up to them.

Still, the vast majority of people are neither complete monsters nor complete angels. Christianly speaking – who of us should be put on pedestals? All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

God alone is good – said Jesus. (Matt 19.17)

So, what is needed is often a middle path, a way of thinking about which buildings to rename, which statues to leave, which to remove: there are so many different variables.

One may be whether the views or actions of the figure in question were typical for their time. If so, that could make them less blameworthy. Another is the extent of their misdeeds and how that is evaluated against their achievements. Churchill [held opinions that would disbar him](https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2002/nov/28/features11.g21) from political office today - despicable yes, but surely massively outweighed by the scale of his accomplishments.

Then there are consequentialist considerations. How does looking at the statue make passers-by feel? This, in turn, will be connected to whether the history still resonates - an ancient statue of some medieval warlord, however bloody and brutal his conquests, probably won't bother anybody.

Then there are other prosaic but important factors, like the cost of pulling a statue down (might the money be better spent elsewhere?).

Decisions about how to remember the past are profoundly political as well as ethical. Next to Balliol College is a stone monument, Martyrs' Memorial. It marks the place where, in the mid-16th Century, in the reign of Queen Mary, Protestant bishops were burned. But the memorial itself was only erected three centuries later, in the mid-19th Century, when elements within the Anglican Church were anxious about the growing influence of Catholicism.

Statues and plaques usually occupy public spaces and confer honour and respect. Pulling them down, or renaming buildings, carries symbolic significance.

Our gospel reading today has Jesus ‘*looking out on the crowds and having compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.****37****Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few.****38****Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.” Matthew 9.36-38*

Jesus ‘looking’ comes just after a long analysis of perspective (historical, political, ethical, financial). To some Jesus saying that people look harassed and helpless sounds overbearing Out of our mouths it could certainly run the danger of sounding patronising, pitying, but the words from Jesus are ones of love, of concern, of a desire for more. And it’s Jesus’ perspective that we are called to have. A perspective that goes beyond our own interests, that moves towards healing, that is fruitful and sometimes that involves tearing down, or reassessing.

Harvest field was biblical symbolism for the harvest at the end of time – what is worthy of the kingdom of God, the values of God – what needs to be purged, purified, burnt up as not of the kingdom.

Then it says:

*Jesus called his twelve disciples to him and gave them authority to drive out impure spirits and to heal every disease and sickness. (10.1)*

Drive out impure spirits: we so often skip over the ‘impure spirits’ in our super-modern, slightly embarrassed kind of way. But Jesus has it right up there at the top of the list for a reason and we can only tackle destructive forces that deny life if we accept they exist.

The Greek word for impure is akathartos – it means unclean, destructive, satanic, adversarial agencies to the ways of God.

In other words, Jesus is commissioning his disciples to follow in his ways to carry on his mission of coming against anything that stands in the way of the kingdom of God – destructive forces and attitudes, death dealing oppressive agencies.

His followers have to be healers, restorers, people who will bring life and hope to others.

His new teaching will need a new way of living and thinking about faith and religion.[[3]](#endnote-3) The disciples have a significant role model to follow. So do we!

The list of apostles reads like a role of honour: these men are chosen, called and special – remember their names! The additional descriptions add depth to who they are, placing them within a family, or a location, or in a profession but also noting their flaws and hangups! Simon is from Canaan (the Canaanites were outsiders in Jewish culture) and described elsewhere as a zealot. Judas has the misfortune to be described, with hindsight, as the one who betrayed Jesus. Thomas escapes being called ‘the one who would doubt’ and Matthew includes himself, the tax collector – a despised occupation – seen as a colluder with the Roman Empire.

They have all been prepared for their role by time spent with Jesus. They are equipped with the Holy Spirit to do all the things Jesus does, as are we too. We too are to have compassion and go to those ‘without a shepherd – without someone to guide them to life in all its fulness’.

When I read this passage today I think of how many people are searching for answers, guidance as a result of Covid 19. It feels as there are so many and the workers really are few. What has been amazing during this crisis is the ease with which so many people have been able to talk about their faith. We are all called to do that, wherever, whoever we are.

When I was training to be a minister back in 1993, I spent the summer in Ghana, West Africa, at a mission college training ministers in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. It was a rich experience. During that time, I went to see for myself the fortresses on the coast at Elmina and Cape Coast that were the centre of the British slave trade. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were shipped out to work as slaves in the colonies from these fortresses. Many died in the journey. The conditions were barbaric and gut wrenching. As a British person I was deeply ashamed of the actions of my forbears.

I remember talking with the Ghanaian Presbyterian ministers back at the mission college about it and the legacy of the colonial past when Ghana was known as the Gold Coast. They were very gracious towards me. A bit like the famous Monty Python sketch ‘what have the Romans done for us’ they listed some of the positive side effects of British colonial rule but obviously the racist attitudes and oppression of slavery cast a long shadow that continues to blight our world today.

I asked about their attitude to the ‘imposition of the Christian faith on the Africans by white missionaries. Wasn’t this colonialism?’ They were unanimous in being grateful for this aspect of colonial influence. We brought them the gospel – the good news of the true God of all the world and God’s love for all people through Jesus Christ. That helped them move on from their tribal warring deities and their animistic beliefs and practices.

Wasn’t Jesus a white man’s religion? ‘Who are you kidding?’ they said. He was a brown skin Palestinian if you want to be precise. But his kingdom is not of this world and he is the true Shepherd to lead us to the green pastures of life, in all its fullness.

Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God is near, that we needed to repent, change, be converted. Those words are still before us today – to constantly challenge ourselves and be converted in our attitudes to one another, to our world, our possessions, our money, our time, our God.

In many ways we are in a *Kairos* moment in the church (that is, a moment when God’s call or challenge is acutely felt). How do we find a new future? How do we face the challenges of our world in this pandemic? *Kairos* moments are acutely disturbing, often shattering our old certainties and requiring of us new reserves of courage, resourcefulness, and hope.

As a nation and across the globe, we are being challenged and confronted by the pain of racial injustice. It too is a *Kairos* moment. We are challenged by our own nation’s history and the wealth that has come from the oppression of others. As our lockdown eases, we face big questions about how we want to live – whether we go back to the old normal or whether we work to create a new normal – a society that is more just, more inclusive, more equitable in its distribution of wealth and opportunity. We are in so many ways in a *Kairos* moment. What will our response be?

Hope is perhaps what we need most of all. There is a quotation of unknown origin that is sometimes attributed to St Augustine[[4]](#endnote-4): ‘Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage: anger at the way things are and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.’ This is the kind of hope into which we are so often called and that the life and ministry of Jesus demonstrated for us.

Can we find and nurture this kind of hope in ourselves and in our communities? It is an amazing and yet terrifying thing to realize that the Kingdom has come near - and we are asked to choose how we respond.

**Prayers**

Lord of all,
you call us to follow you into an unknown future.
The way ahead is puzzling.
We cannot see the direction we should take
for our own lives for our churches and for our world.

Lord of all,
when the chaos begins to subside,
teach us to trust in your still small voice.
Teach us to listen for the whisper that urges us to change;
to pay attention to your guidance and your love for us.
Teach us to look and to see where you are already at work.
Teach us not to look for opportunities to be heroes
but spaces where we are asked to be faithful
in meeting the need in front of us.

Lord of all,
may we believe in your promise
that you will use what we have and what we are,
and like bread and wine to feed the hungry and the lost,
you will make what is ordinary
extraordinary by your presence.
**Amen.**

 Prayers of intercession

Loving Lord, you call and equip us to serve you. Watch over those who risk their own safety by caring for oppressed believers. Strengthen and protect all those who are persecuted for sharing their faith in places where living out their Christian faith in peace is not allowed.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Loving Lord, you empower us to live out our discipleship. Give wisdom, imagination and the strength to persevere to those who face apathy as they seek to live out their discipleship.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Loving Lord, you understand what it means to suffer for what is right. Give comfort and courage to those who are unjustly imprisoned, intimidated and tortured because of their faith.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

Loving Lord, you taught us to pray for those who abuse and hurt us. We pray for people who persecute those who hold different beliefs from their own; may they be touched by faith and their hearts be opened to love, that the world may be united in your love.
Lord, hear us.
Lord, graciously hear us.

In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray.
Amen.

HYMN: Go forth and tell

A sending out prayer

Go to serve; go to love;
go to bring healing; go to bring peace;
go in the strength of the Father;
go in the power of Jesus;
go united by the Spirit.
Go – and know his grace.
Amen.

1. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/what-does-jesus-do-mayor-of-bristol-defends-protests-which-pulled-down-edward-colston-statue?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11595147_daily%20news%2009%20June&utm_content=3&dm_i=16DQ,6WIVF,KCOFX7,RQGEE,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-41904800> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-6/explore-respond> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dianne Craven <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/107-may-june-2020-a/proper-6/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)