**27th September 2020**

**Call to worship**
*Based on Psalm 24.1-5*

This is the day that the Lord has made.
**Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**
The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it,
**the world, and all who live in it;**for he founded it upon the seas
**and established it upon the waters.**
Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?
**Who may stand in his holy place?**Those who have clean hands and pure hearts,
**They will receive blessing from the Lord.**

**Prayer**

**A prayer of confession**Let us confess the harm we have done to God's world, by failing to care for it, and by turning away from God's ways.

We confess that we have failed to give you glory for the wonder and beauty of creation.
We're sorry, Lord.
**Forgive us Lord, and heal your land.**

We confess that we have failed to care properly for animals and birds, and for the land itself.
We're sorry, Lord.
**Forgive us Lord, and heal your land.**

We confess that our greed and comfort have led to pollution and waste, and have caused the poor to suffer.
We're sorry, Lord.
**Forgive us Lord, and heal your land.**

We confess the lack of understanding between city and countryside, between farmers and consumers. We're sorry, Lord.
**Forgive us Lord, and heal your land.**

We confess that the land has suffered as we have failed to let you be God in every area of our national life. We're sorry, Lord.
**Forgive us Lord, and heal your land.**

**Litany**
*Based on Colossians 1.15-20 (with Romans 8.18-22, Philippians 2.5-11, Ephesians 1.9-10, Revelation 21.5)*

*This needs to be narrated, by one or more speakers, with feeling and with pace. It helps if the congregation have all the words, not simply the responses. This can either be used instead of usual intercessions, or in addition.*

Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**by you all things were created.**
All creeping things, all flying things,
all living things, all dying things;
the highest hills, the deepest seas,
the strongest gale, the slightest breeze,
the blossom on a cherry tree,
a spinning spider's artistry;
The smell of dry earth after rain,
each cell within a human brain;
aach fallen leaf, each towering pine
reveals your intricate design.
Creator Lord, we stand amazed,
and for your earth, we give you praise.
Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**by you all things were created.**

Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**for you all things were created.**
The smoothest pebble on the shore,
detritus on the forest floor,
the undiscovered depths of space,
the wrinkles on a baby's face;
each sparrow and each human hair
is numbered and is in your care.
All iron and oil and diamonds too,
whilst used by us, belong to you.
Forgive us Lord, for we forget,
all things are yours, and yet,
provider Lord, we stand amazed,
and with your earth, we give you praise.
Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**for you all things were created.**

Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**in you all things hold together.**
All of earth's greatest mysteries,
and all our personal histories;
each planet and each grain of sand,
you hold them in your nail-scarred hands.
You feed the birds and clothe the flowers,
you warm the soil and send the showers,
you sound the rhythms of the earth,
of tides and seasons, death and birth.
It is for you creation sings,
the head, the centre of all things.
Sustainer Lord, we stand amazed,
and with your earth, we give you praise.
Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**in you all things hold together.**

Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**in you all things are made new.**
Lord, God before all time began,
yet you became a Son of Man.
You stepped into the world you made,
a world once good, now spoilt, decayed.
As Son of Man your death reversed
the chaos of creation's curse.
The earth itself quaked on that day,
released from bondage to decay.
All things are reconciled to you,
Creation's hope is born anew.
Redeemer Lord, we stand amazed
and with your earth, we give you praise.
Jesus, Lord of the Earth,
**in you all things are made new.**

Taken from Roots <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/seasons-and-festivals/festivals/harvest/resources-for-celebrating-harvest/creation-time/caring-for-gods-creation>

**Creation Calls by Brian Doerkson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAtzO8B1UK8>

**New Testament: Philippians 2.1-13**

During his briefing last Monday, [the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, said](https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-scientific-advisor-and-chief-medical-officer-briefing-on-coronavirus-covid-19-21-september-2020--2)[[1]](#endnote-1) ‘You cannot in an epidemic just take your own risk. Unfortunately, you’re taking a risk on behalf of everybody else.’ How does this statement relate to Paul’s challenge in Philippians 2.4 to look after other people’s interests?

*In humility value others above yourselves,****4****not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

I want to reflect on how our public life might operate on the principle of looking after the interests of other people at this time of pandemic. It is also our Harvest so I want to reflect on what this means for looking after the interests of our planet. I also want to place this in context of the situation Paul was addressing in this letter and local rivalries and disputes.

Last week Rod introduced this letter by saying that Paul is writing to a church he founded which was in a strategic place. It was the first European plant of Christianity in around 52AD. Philippi was a Roman colony on the high road joining Asia with Europe. So, it was a strategic plant for the growing church.

Rod said that in another sense all Christians find themselves in a strategic place. All of us are surrounded by people who do not know the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of us are surrounded by people whose securities and hopes are being threatened in this pandemic. We are still here for a reason. We are a colony of heaven in this earthly place.

Paul was under house arrest which meant he was guarded night and day by Roman guards. Instead of seeing this as a hindrance he strategically saw the opportunity here to share the gospel. He had a captive audience. He made the most of the opportunity.

Before lockdown I always looked forward to getting my hair cut at the barbers. The opportunities I had to share in the men’s barbers about the Lord was great. The barbers would share about their lives, their divorces, their money problems, their views on politics and life and then would ask me what I did. Well, what an opportunity. OK I was paying them to listen to me and be polite but like Paul, as he says in verse 15-18 of this first chapter, there may be mixed motives for preaching Christ but the main point is that Christ is preached – make the most of those strategic moments.

This letter is written because the church has sent Paul a gift of money by the messenger Epaphroditus. But there had been a problem. He got seriously ill. The Philippians must have wondered what had happened and whether he’s run off with the money. Paul explains at the end of this chapter, that Epaphroditus has been a faithful fellow worker who has risked his life in service to the Lord.

But the heart of this short letter is Jesus himself and Paul’s encouragement to the church there to stand firm and stay united in Christ. Jesus is our joy, even at times of suffering and struggle, and he makes life worth living.

In the future scientists may be able to prolong life, but will it be worth living? wrote Nigel Hawkes in the Times a few years back. Apparently, an Oxford Professor claimed it may be possible to prolong life until the age of 115. But is Nigel Hawkes right to ask: ‘But will it be worth living?’ Increased lifespan is of little use unless it is for a life worth living quality of life over quantity of life.

The apostle Paul did not see the longevity of life as a major objective. Indeed, he regarded death as something of even greater worth.’ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.’ V21

It is a vital question for everyone: What is life for? Some people answer that by trying to be successful, or becoming wealthy and secure, others want happiness and health, others want hedonism: sex, drugs and rock and roll. Many set out on those paths and find that something is still missing. The Christian claim is that God is missing. We focus on creation and creaturely comforts and miss out on a relationship with our Creator. We are mindful of a Creator as we come to celebrate Harvest.

For the apostle Paul, Jesus had made his life profoundly worth living. In the letter to the Philippians Paul writes directly and indirectly about why this is the case and how it can be the case for us his readers today.

What he did for Paul and his readers then, Jesus can still do for us today.

The word ‘joy’, in noun or verb form, appears sixteen times in this epistle. Paul was in prison, probably in Ephesus. He was in chains, unjustly accused and awaiting trial and possible execution. Yet his joy is overflowing.

As this pandemic goes on many are becoming fatigued and anxious. Some are fearful for their futures, fearful they may be out of work, fearful of not seeing relatives, that Christmas will be cancelled. The Prime Minister said this week we could have restrictions on our daily living for the next six months. Already people are going out buying up toilet rolls again!

What can we learn from Paul about keeping the joy of Christ in demanding circumstances? It is all in this letter.

He encourages us to become Christ like in attitude because of concern for the name of Jesus and the glory of God. Chapter two is a wonderful hymn to the self-humility of Christ. At the end of chapter one Paul has written:

*Stand firm in the one Spirit] striving together as one for the faith of the gospel v27*

When people or events come against you: stand firm’ in unity against all opposition and attacks that you are bound to encounter. The language Paul uses is that of the phalanx – the most formidable military device of antiquity. With shields together and spears out front, the soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder I files eight men deep. As long as they did not break ranks, they were virtually invincible.

I do not know if you watch wildlife programmes. The other week Extinction: The Facts on Sunday night was chilling viewing outlining the threat to millions of species at this moment of climate crisis. The coronavirus pandemic fills up most people’s horiozons at the moment. Most people are just in survival mode and can’t see beyond this pandemic. It is understandable. But the larger, bigger crisis is what is happening to our planet, which may actually be linked to the rise of new viruses and possible future pandemics.

David Attenborough’s Extinction programme gave warning that whole eco systems are under threat and that a million species are at risk of extinction because of human activity. Attenborough’s soothing matter of fact narrations seemed out of place in the heartbreak and horror which departed from the usual beauty of the natural world these wildlife programmes celebrate. Instead the message was nature is collapsing around us which puts us at greater risk, threatening our ability to feed ourselves, control our climate. If we take these forecasts seriously and are mindful of Pauls exhortation to consider the needs of others not just ourselves then there is a huge challenge to our way of life and our consumption in order not just to think of ourselves nor others, but the other life on our planet.

Paul calls for us to stand firm and be united in our purpose for the gospel.

I saw one of those wildfire programmes a while back about Springboks in the Kalahari. They go round in packs and are usually very alert to predators and dangers. But if they start fighting among themselves, they get distracted and can be picked off. The programme showed a lion prowling around looking for prey, two springboks started to have a fight and didnt notice the Lion who seized the moment and leapt on one of them.

Paul is warning the church not to fight one another, not to fight other churches or denominations. Contend as one for the gospel. Otherwise you will fall.

A Christ like attitude is the key to unity. Any disunity in the church would have detracted from Paul’s joy he says at the start of this chapter. There is a hint of disunity mentioned in chapter 4.2 between two women called Euodia and Syntyche. No great split but Paul can see the warning signs and so appeals for unity with all the passion and arguments he can muster. So, he appeals in verse one to their unity in Christ, their experience of God’s love, the unity the Holy Spirit brings and the love we have for each other as Christians – their tenderness and compassion.

Disunity so often comes from ‘selfish ambition and vain conceit’ (2v3). There is nothing wrong with ambition itself. Ambition is the desire to succeed, do well. Nothing wrong with that if it is for the glory of God. The problem comes with selfish ambition.

Gore Vidal described Christianity as the greatest disaster ever to strike the West. He said ‘it is not enough to succeed. Others must fail. Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies’. Obviously, such selfish ambitions will bring disunity and disaster, socially to a community, a society, even to a league of nations.

The opposite of such pride and arrogance is the humility that Paul urges, and he points to Christ who humbled himself. He let go of his natural status, didn’t consider equality with God something to be grasped. the act of grasping is a contradiction to Jesus attitude to life. Instead of climbing the ladder of achievement he climbed down; he demoted himself, he came downwardly mobile so he could be with us and redeem us. The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve (Mark 10.45)

If we follow Christ, we give up our selfish ambitions, self-importance and self-centredness and follow the way of humility and unselfish love. It may not be the path of greatness in the eyes of the world, but it is in the eyes of God.

We let God exalt us. We do things for the glory of God, for the wellbeing of God’s kingdom, having in mind the interest and needs of others as well as ourselves.

it is much easier to criticize the selfishness of others than to notice our own selfishness. I am reminded of Jesus’ story about the log in our own eyes (Matthew 7.3-5) as we see the speck in the eye of others.

Since the wearing of masks is mainly to protect others from us (rather than us from them), is it selfish when those who are not exempt fail to comply with the rules? Do we always queue politely? Have we always made an effort to thank those such as shop and utility workers or teachers and support staff (as well as the more obvious NHS and care workers) who stayed at work during the pandemic? Are we among those who seem to become more selfish when they get behind the steering wheel of a car? Is each of us more concerned about how we look to others rather than whether we are actually looking after the interest of other people?

This passage is an attitude check.

Paul ends by saying

*Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,****13****for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.*

He has urged them to take responsibility for their lives and a responsible attitude to the society around them. Many in our society are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions. There is an increasing tendency to shift responsibility for their actions to blame the government, the economy, the employers, parents, etc.

The refusal to take responsibility goes right back to the start of creation when Adam sinned. Adam refused to take responsibility for his actions in eating the apple. He blamed his wife. Eve refused to take responsibility for her actions. She blamed the snake. And the poor snake didn’t have a leg to stand on!

Paul urges the Philippians to take responsibility for working out their salvation. Salvation is a bit of jargon word. It could mean freedom, it could mean healing, it could mean wholeness. To be saved by Jesus is to be set free, free from guilt, our addictions, our fear of death and other fears. Jesus sets us free to love God and love others and serve others – to be whole, to be our true selves as God made us to be and meant us to be. Stewards of creation, carers of one another. Freedom and responsibility go together. Work out your salvation. This is quite different to work **for your** salvation. It is not an objective yet to be reached or a benefit to be merited but rather a possession to be explored and enjoyed more fully. Our freedom is to be worked out just as say a marriage is to be worked out. A Marriage is a marriage, but it merits a lifetime of exploration, enjoyment, development, and discovery. So, we need to work out our faith day by day in Christian service and love for God, ourselves and others.

It is our responsibility to discover our gifts and use them.

**Charles Francis** **Feeney** was an Irish-American businessman and [philanthropist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philanthropist) . He made his fortune as a co-founder of the [Duty Free Shoppers Group](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DFS_Group). Feeney gave away his fortune in secret for many years, until a business dispute resulted in his identity being revealed in 1997. Over the course of his life, Feeney has given away more than $8 billion. On September 14, 2020, Feeney shut his philanthropic trust, the Atlantic Philanthropies after it accomplished its mission of giving away all of Feeney's money by 2020.

Feeney was known for his frugality, living in a rented apartment, not owning a car or a house, flying economy-class and wearing a $10 [Casio F-91W](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Casio_F-91W) watch. He has credited his charitable spirit to his education at the Catholic School of  [St. Mary of the Assumption High School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Mary_of_the_Assumption_High_School) in New Jersey. Just an encouragement to any teachers - sometimes your pupils do pay attention to what you are saying and the values you are promoting.

God’s work in us includes our wills. Pauls says in verse 13:

*God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose*.

Many fear to trust God with their futures because they fear God will make them do something which they have no desire to do, or that he will make a mess of their lives. If our will is surrendered to God’s will God will give us the desire to do whatever God is calling us to do - where our heart is. God will work out a good purpose for our lives. What God wants is for our good. May not necessarily be easy but it will be good and fulfilling the potential as the whole person we were created to be and a blessing to others and our society.

May God, our Creator, help us to work out our faith in Christ and have the same mindset as our Lord and Saviour.

**Prayer**

*A theme prayer:*

God who came to earth as a humble servant
and who challenges us to empty ourselves of all pride and selfishness,
give us courage both to confess Jesus Christ as Lord
and to live out our calling in equally humble service.
**Amen.**

**Harvest prayer**

A prayer of intercession

*Use this prayer as a framework for the concerns of the congregation*

Lord of the harvest,
the time of sowing and the time of reaping are yours.
The time of weeping and the time of singing are yours, too.
Thank you for the time of sowing and the time of reaping.

Let there be harvest in your world.
We pray for those places in the world where the crops have failed
and for those where poverty is the result of human aggression and human greed…
We pray for a harvest of peace and plenty
**and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing.**

Let there be harvest in the hearts of children, women and men.
We pray for those who are spiritually starved,
who long for meaning in their lives and who need to belong.
Give to your church patience and energy, boldness to speak out and the ability to listen…
We pray for a harvest of faith and of lives transformed by the Gospel
**and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing.**

Let there be harvest in our own lives, and in the lives of those we know and love.
We pray for those who are sick or troubled, for those who are lonely or who have suffered loss…
We pray for ourselves, that, whatever difficulties we face, our lives may be grateful and joyful.
We pray for a harvest of deepened love, more faithful discipleship,
**and we promise to work with you for it, both reaping and sowing.**

Lord of the harvest,
the time of sowing and the time of reaping are yours.
The time of weeping and the time of singing are yours, too,
**and we promise to work with you for the harvest of your kingdom, both reaping and sowing.
Amen.**

1. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/109-september-october-2020-a/proper-21/postscript [↑](#endnote-ref-1)