**10th January 2021**

**Call to worship**

This the day that the Lord has made.
**Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**
We are the family of God.
**And are called by God’s name.**
We are heirs of Christ’s kingdom.
**And born of the Spirit.**
Let us, therefore, come together in thanksgiving.
Amen.



**A prayer of adoration**

*This prayer can be read by two voices (as indicated), with a congregational response at the end.*
**1&2** Lord God, how awesome you are. Your voice is powerful and majestic.
**1** Once, the earth was without shape.
**2** Dark and empty.
**1&2** Then you spoke, awesome God.
**1** And light shone.
**2** You separated the light from the darkness.
**1&2** The whole world changed.
**1** You later sent your Son, Jesus.
**2** To live and walk among us on the earth.
**1** His ministry heralded by John the Baptist.
**2** Who baptized Jesus in the Jordan.
**1&2**The whole world changed.
**1** The sky split open.
**2** And your Holy Spirit came down like a dove.
**1&2** Then you spoke, awesome God. And continue to speak today through your Holy Spirit.
**All Majestic, awesome, all-powerful God, we adore your holy name. Amen.**



**Prayers of penitence**

A prayer of confession

Lord, when you came into the world, things changed. When we came into a relationship with you, things changed. Life became filled with a new sense of purpose and peace. But, Lord, sometimes we let you down by doing wrong things or failing to do right things.
**We are sorry, Lord.**

Sometimes, Lord, through pride, stubbornness or fear we build barriers and keep others at arm’s length – even you, Lord.
**We are sorry, Lord.**

At times we give in to our weaknesses and temptations, failing to draw on your strength. At times we are troubled by difficult situations and find it hard to trust you.
**We are sorry, Lord.**

Help us to turn such things around and turn to you. Help us to learn from the past and, drawing on your strength and peace, make a better future.
**Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

O God, when Jesus was baptized, you spoke of your love for him. You showed your love for us through Jesus’ death and resurrection. By the power of the cross, the darkness of our wrongdoing is banished by the light of your loving forgiveness.
**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

**Hymn: How sweet the name of Jesus sounds**

**Christmas Appeal : Bardopur Bangladesh**

**Gemma – testimony from the frontline**

**Mark 1.4-11**

A week ago, we wished everyone a Happy New Year. A week on it doesn’t seem so happy now.

A national lockdown was announced last Monday coming into effect at midnight on Wednesday morning. Schools have been closed, parents thrown into the demands of home working and home schooling, teachers into the demands of keeping key workers’ children and vulnerable children occupied in school while providing online lessons for those at home. Businesses have closed, activities and meetings have stopped, and people are getting anxious again about the rise in COVID-19 cases as a result of the variant strains. Hospitals are being overwhelmed and frontline staff are feeling exhausted and vulnerable.

We hope the vaccinations will bring us relief and change the situation. But after having been told that the virus would be over last summer, and then it would be OK for Christmas, the Chief Medical Officer Chris Witty said that it is likely there will be some restrictions come next Christmas.

Our world has changed and almost a year on we have had to get used to a new way of living and it has been painful.

And then as if to add to our unhappy start to the New Year we had all the rioting and insurrection in America, at the incitement of an election denying deranged President, who cannot accept defeat and who has a cult like following of a mob who are armed to the teeth with weapons, guns, and incendiary devices. It was a shock, to see those scenes, but not entirely unpredictable, given that Trump had been allowed to make all these unfounded claims that the election had been rigged and few in his own party had called him out.

*“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”―*[*Edmund Burke*](https://books.google.com/books?id=OwQbAAAAMAAJ&q=%E2%80%9CThe+only+thing+necessary+for+the+triumph+of+evil+is+for+good+men+to+do+nothing.%E2%80%9D&dq=%E2%80%9CThe+only+thing+necessary+for+the+triumph+of+evil+is+for+good+men+to+do+nothing.%E2%80%9D&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjGrp7xt77LAhUH6WMKHVewCusQ6AEITzAJ)*the English Philosopher.*

He went on: *When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.*

*Brian McLaren a Christian leader in the USA has done* research into authoritarianism and how authoritarian attempts work[[1]](#endnote-1). Social psychologists, following the work of Bob Altemeyer, have found that about a third of all human populations can be described as potential authoritarian followers. In the presence of stress, shame or fear, they can be activated. Race and religion play a significant role in their activation.

In the United States (and other countries as well) authoritarian movements are often fueled by white supremacy. White supremacists often prefer authoritarianism to democracy because true democracy affirms the equality of all people, whatever their race. Authoritarian leaders easily stoke racial animus to divide societies and aggregate followers in a culture war. Christian supremacy is often linked to white supremacy in authoritarian movements. White Christians may be ashamed to admit to white supremacy, but they see Christian supremacy as something to be proud of. Non-white Christians may also support Christian supremacy.

Surprising numbers of Christian leaders in the US support white Christian supremacy; overtly, tacitly, or subconsciously. Surprising numbers also celebrate “biblical manhood” which is really a toxic masculinity that easily expresses itself in authoritarian leadership and followership. By teaching their members to submit to strong-men leaders like Trump, even associating God’s favour and sovereignty with their dominating tendencies, these Christian leaders have whitewashed Trump’s authoritarianism with moral legitimacy. By teaching uncritical obedience (often by quoting Romans 13:1-4 and ignoring Romans 12:1-2), by prophesying divine favour, by shaming and demonising opponents and by pardoning or minimising Trump’s offences, these Christian leaders have domesticated and groomed adherents so they can be deployed as loyal and adoring subjects in Trump’s service.

That’s why in video footage from this week’s insurrection attempt at the US Capitol (which was coordinated with similar displays at some state capitols), you’ll see zealous Trump-Christians carrying ‘Jesus Saves’ signs, and raising crosses and sporting T-shirts with Bibles on the front of them. Tragically, too many American churches have become aggregators for Trumpist organisers, rendering sincere but gullible believers tools in Trump's delusional power-grab.

McLaren concludes by saying:

Faith is a Christian virtue, but credulity is not. Faith can be life-giving, but it can also become cancerous. When it does, it needs strong chemotherapy. You can call it critical thinking, discernment or doubt, but whatever you call it, many Christians in America and elsewhere need treatment, and everyone needs the preventative medicine of good spiritual preparation.

There needs to be dramatic change in American society and a challenging of attitudes and behaviour. The Reichstag fire in Germany of 1933[[2]](#endnote-2) enabled Hitler and the Nazis to scrap the fragile Weimar democracy that had brought them to power. Hitler’s murderous fantasies could now become reality. War, Auschwitz and the German catastrophe followed. The playbook from the German fall of democracy in 1933 seems well in place, including rogue military factions, the destabilization of cities, and racism as a political strategy. The person with the nuclear codes has been deemed too dangerous to have a twitter account. The next two weeks are a dangerous moment for what happens next. We need to pray.

Our bible passages as we start this new year will focus on the change Jesus brought to our world and the challenge of following him.

This passage, at the start of Mark’s gospel, is the first appearance of Jesus as an adult and comes at the beginning of his ministry. His baptism is a new beginning and a transformation. John the baptizer says that he is not worthy to untie Jesus’ shoes. He recognizes that Jesus will be able to do much greater things by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our new beginnings come through the forgiveness God offers, which is not just the once in a lifetime event of our baptism, but all the forward-looking opportunities that God offers us each and every day.

Mark uses the powerful image of the barrier between heaven and earth torn open. Although we no longer understand the universe in this way, the idea of ‘heaven on earth’ is a common picture of joy and fulfilment. Yet this image is often used, maybe abused, to describe luxury products from hotel rooms to cosmetics. We may feel that we are a long way from experiencing heaven on earth at the moment. But Christian theology has always seen the Spirit as the marker of God’s presence. The Spirit is with us even in the darkest days. We trust that God is at work: keep faith.

The gift of the Spirit kick-started Jesus’ ministry, leading him to preach and teach and challenge injustice wherever he found it.

Many people begin the new year with resolutions that may or may not last beyond the end of January! For my Christmas presents this year I received a golf caddy and some golf shoes to encourage me to take up a new hobby and find a bit of harmless downtime distraction. I went for a round of golf on Monday to try them all out and then came home to get Boris saying that we were going into lockdown for at least seven weeks, which also meant the closure of golf courses. So much for good intentions.

Some of these New Year resolutions are, of course, more realistic than others. Some people will share in the Methodist Covenant Prayer that I used last week that begins the new year with words of total commitment to God: ‘I am no longer my own, but yours’. What God-given strategies and resources can we identify to help us choose our commitments wisely, and keep the promises we have made? To commit to following Christ means a continual state of mind seeking to change and grow more like Christ.

John the Baptist’s mission was to prepare the way for the Lord – to create the circumstances in which change could happen. He built a group of people whose lives were oriented towards the promise of a new future, ready and waiting for Jesus. His call was to the steady, patient work of preparation, laying the foundations for all that Jesus would do. Do we value his work highly enough? Do we value our own work enough when it does not lead to immediate change but demands steady, patient commitment to preparation, as we wait to see what God is going to do? We think of all those involved in the vaccination programme doing steady patient work trying to bring change. We pray for those who are at work in our communities and political systems trying to bring positive change.

[Greta Thunberg’s the environmental campaigner reaches her 18th birthday](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/greta-thunberg-18-flying-interview-zpf9v0x25?shareToken=c2229ae78839c15540a5885a26093588). She asks, for her 18th birthday,[[3]](#endnote-3) a ‘promise from everyone that they will do everything they can’ for the planet. What new things can you do? The writer of the article, Rosie Kinchen, said Thunberg offers a lot of light and no condemnation. When asked about a birthday present, ‘she shifts in her chair uncomfortably, trying to think of something. “The headlights on my bike are broken, in Sweden it gets very dark in the winter”, she says, to keep me happy. I bet she’ll just borrow some.’ Yes, we need some light.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia,* is exciting in that it invites people to look towards a new future where old mistakes are left behind and new possibilities open up. The traditional translation ‘repentance’ is less attractive because it is often understood as encouraging people to focus on what has gone wrong in the past, rather than what could go better in the future. How can we help people envision repentance as a door to new life? Recognizing mistakes, and not putting out false stories to hide mistakes is the way to admit the light. Much of the light which Jesus brings is seen in the way he turns round seemingly hopeless situations and people: Peter, who denied him, Paul, who persecuted Jesus’ followers, a paralyzed man, the woman at the well of Samaria etc.

Baptism is a sign of new beginnings. Every act of repentance is a reminder that, through baptism, we have died to sin and are alive to Christ, to new possibilities, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The key is looking forward to what might and can be, and not to dwell on what we have turned from and left behind (see Luke 9.62).

But we are empowered and affirmed to make positive change because we know we are loved. Love changes everything. Love is the positive motivator for positive change. Fear of course can motivate people and often does. But fear as a motivator will close you down, triggering your aversion pathways as psychologists say, leaving you with a lingering sense of vigilance and caution and anxiety.

If you think God disapproves of you or is looking for a chance to punish you then your faith is going to be an anxious cautious one. It will weaken your creativity and discernment. If you know you are loved unconditionally, as Jesus was affirmed in his baptism, and as I believe we are in ours, you will be open to new experiences, more playful and carefree, less cautious and happier to change and try new things. Your minds will be opened. The spirit in which you do something is often as important as the act itself. If you do something in a critical or negative way, if you over think or worry or carry out a task with gritted teeth then you will be living a fearful life. If, however you do the same thing in an open hearted, welcoming manner your life has a chance to become richer, warmer, more flexible, and creative. All because you know you are loved.

If true metanoia, repentance, change of direction, happens in people, in societies, it will come about because there is love. We pray for God to do a new thing, in us, in our country, in the United States, in the world. To baptize us again with the spirit of new life, of love. May we become a new creation.

**SONG: I am a new creation**

**Intercessions**

Eternal God, it feels as if the whole world has changed
and yet in you there is stability and the opportunity of a new beginning.
So, we pray now for those whose lives are in turmoil,
those whose lives have been turned upside down, those who feel lost.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope,
and use our prayers in Jesus’ name to strengthen them.

We pray for those for whom the lockdown has come as a relief,
for those who now feel safer,
but we pray too for those who now feel desperate,
alone and worried about their jobs, their finances, their mental health.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus’ name to strengthen them.

We pray for children and young adults as their schooling is disrupted,
we pray for those who enjoy learning from home,
but pray too for those who will lose confidence,
who miss their friends, who feel vulnerable.
We remember their parents
and the parents of children with special needs,
struggling to cope on their own.
We pray for teachers, administrative staff,
and all those who feel overwhelmed.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus’ name to strengthen them.

We pray for the people of a divided America
at this time of political and racial tension and transition,
for outgoing President Donald Trump and President-elect Joe Biden.
We pray too for countries around the world
struggling with ethnic violence and militancy.
We remember the people of West Africa
and in particular the people of Niger, villagers who live in fear,
those who have been wounded in recent attacks
and those who have been bereaved.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus’ name to strengthen them.

We pray for those who have been injured
or lost their homes and loved ones in the severe weather,
remembering particularly the people of Norway affected by landslides,
and those in Australia battered by cyclones.
We pray for those who work in the emergency services,
those whose work is dangerous and traumatic.
We pray for those in refugees camps
with little protection from the weather,
those who sleep rough,
those who can't afford to heat their homes.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus’ name to strengthen them.

We pray for one another, our families,
our communities, our church fellowships.
May we support those who are unwell or grieving.
May we bring fresh hope to those who feel forgotten and are vulnerable,
and may we – both practically and prayerfully – share our faith
in your Son Jesus in whose name we entrust these prayers to you.
Amen.

**A simple worship activity**

Remembering baptism as a sign of new beginnings.

* Every act of repentance is a reminder that, through baptism, we have died to sin and are alive to Christ, to new possibilities, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The key is looking forward to what might and can be, and not to dwell on what we have turned from and left behind (see Luke 9.62).
* Set up a large bowl of water at the back of the worship space. Stand by the bowl and ask everyone to turn and face you. Say, ‘Jesus was changed and empowered at his baptism. It marked the beginning of a new ministry, a new direction to his life.’
* Either invite people to come and dip their hands in the water, or fling some of it far and wide! Say, ‘Remember your baptism. You too are changed and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and given new direction in your life. Think about what must be left behind.’
* During a time of silence, move to the front of the worship space. Invite everyone to turn and face front. Say, ‘Here, today, we all make a new beginning. Think of what we have explored and discussed today. Think of what God may be calling you to do in the days that lie ahead. Pray for God’s guidance and blessing.’ Say together, slowly, the Lord’s Prayer.

**Hymn: Crown him with many crowns**

**Lord, help us to be open to your prompting
as we seek to discover what you would have us be and do.
Remind us again and again that you have promised to be our
guide and companion on our journey.
Help us to look forward with renewed commitment,
and bless our thinking and speaking and doing.
In your name.
Amen.**

1. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/Blog/The-storming-of-the-US-Capitol-by-Christians-is-a-sickening-sight> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/opinion/trump-germany.html [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [Greta Thunberg on turning 18 and why she won’t tell you off for flying | The Sunday Times Magazine | The Sunday Times (thetimes.co.uk)](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/greta-thunberg-18-flying-interview-zpf9v0x25?shareToken=c2229ae78839c15540a5885a26093588) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)