**21st March 2021**

**Call to worship**

We come into the presence of Jesus to worship him today.

In our Bible reading for today from John’s gospel, Jesus says:

I, when I am lifted up[[f](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=john+12&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-26613f)] from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’

As we get closer to Easter and the cross and resurrection of our Lord, we sing our first hymn today: Lift high the cross

**A prayer of adoration**

Yours, Lord, were the arms stretched wide on the cross,
a welcome to all in the midst of your agony.
Yours were the arms spread in blessing after the resurrection.
Crucified Lord, risen Lord,
we adore you in your pain and in your victory,
your welcome ever the same,
gathering us to you and blessing us,
enfolding us in your loving embrace.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, forgive us for not welcoming others as you do,
for looking askance at the stranger in our midst.
We confess that we are quick to note the differences between ourselves and others,
but you treat all people the same.

Forgive us for revelling in the presumed privilege of being your children.
Help us to break down barriers to you; we cannot keep you to ourselves.
Help us to welcome, unconditionally, all who seek you,
and to take your welcome wherever we go – to be church without walls.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God, thank you for welcoming us back no matter what we have done;
for that initial embrace that welcomed us, though we were sinners;
for the forgiveness that greets us every time we turn back to you.
Help us to embody your forgiveness in our dealings with one another
and with those outside the flock.
May our welcome be the sign of the greater welcome that comes from you. **Amen.**

**Testimony** Simon Helme

The minister asked me to give an example of how faith makes a difference. How can you refuse the minister!

Four years ago on Maundy Thursday my mother died.

A few weeks before that I received a phone call from my brother to say that my mother who had been taken in to hospital in Blackpool was seriously ill. She had recently moved into a care home up there to be near my brother. She was admitted with an infection but it had taken a turn for the worse. The nurses were suggesting that we should prepare ourselves that this could be the end. I rushed up to her bedside at the first opportunity. I found my brother Andrew and his wife Judith there and they told me that the medics had said her kidneys had stopped working and the outlook was bleak. They gave her only 2-4 days.

Mum was slipping in and out of consciousness and was a little restless. It was a sombre and pensive time sat around the bed. We stayed there until the evening when visiting times ended but at the end of the day she was moved into a private room from the eight bed ward she was on. We went home to prepare for the next day and prepare for the worst.

I was mindful of the passage that I had to preach on that Sunday, **Luke 18.1-8.**

.I usually read the scripture set for the forthcoming Sunday at the start of the week in order for God to speak to me through the week’s events. Pondering on this passage that evening in Blackpool a number of reactions came to me. I was struck when Jesus encouraged his disciples to always pray and not give up. I was struck by the widow who kept coming back to the judge and kept pestering him.

Since my mother had been diagnosed with dementia a few years ago I’ll be honest I have been praying for the Lord to take her home. They say you lose someone before you lose some one with dementia and we have seen the slow decline in her ability to remember who we were and who she was. We have been blessed in that the type of dementia she has had has not made her too anxious or agitated. But I have felt like that widow going back to the judge and asking when, when will you end this? I know many of you are in similar positions and pray the same thing for your loved ones. When will this be over? When will it end? We keep bothering the great judge.

But I was also challenged by the words of Jesus: always pray and don’t give up. And at the end of the parable he asks the question: when the Son of Man comes will he find faith on the earth?

Prayer is as much about letting God speak to us as it is about us speaking to God.

What was the faith I needed to show in this situation? Certainly another word for faith is trust. We can ask the question, we can bother God with the same old requests, we can wrestle in prayer but faith is ultimately trust that God knows best. In God’s timing.

But faith is also ‘the faith’ – what you believe and hold dear. What values and hopes do you hold and trust in.

Christians believe that there is a God, who made us in love to know him, but that as a human race we turned away and were lost to him. However he has promised to bring us back to himself. God sent his Son into the world to break the power of sin and death, at infinite cost to himself, by going to the cross. Christian teaching is that Jesus rose from the dead and passed through the heavens and is now ruling history and preparing a future new heaven and new earth, without death and suffering, in which we will be with him forever. And then all the deepest longings of our hearts will find their fulfilment.

It is fair to say that if you are a Christian with those beliefs – about who you are to God and what is in store for you – but you are not experiencing peace and meaning, then it is because you are not thinking it through enough. Or your thinking is being undermined or corrupted from other sources.

I realised that we were going along with the secular godless narrative that death was something to be feared, the end of your dreams, just nothingness.

My mother has had a strong and unwavering simple faith all her life. Now of all times I realised it must mean something. Now of all times we must celebrate it. If we were feeling downcast and meaningless we were not being faithful enough. We were not working out the implications of what she believed and what we believed.

*You should always pray and not give up. When the Son of Man comes will he find faith?*

My mother loved playing the piano. She played it for church and fellowship meetings. She sung in the choir. She loved the traditional hymns and she loved the modern songs. Her copy of Mission Praise Music edition has disintegrated because she has thumbed it through so much. I can recall how she would sit at her piano and just play one song or hymn after another going through the book. Having taken my iPad with me I downloaded a copy of Hymns ancient and modern through my kindle app.

We went into hospital and Judith my sister in law and I formed a scratch choir. My brother who doesn’t really do singing just hummed in the corner. We went through hymns ancient and modern all day singing praise to God round the bedside of mum. She stared to join in, humming at first and then as her spirit grew stronger even managed some of the words.

I have to say that the version of hymns ancient and modern I downloaded was a corrupted version. The spelling could trip you up. So for example there is a line in the hymn Praise my soul the king of heaven that should read ‘in his arms he gently bears us’. In this version it read ‘in his arms he gently beats us’. We would be singing along and scanning the line and then burst out laughing.

But singing hymns is singing your faith and reminding yourself of what we believe and hold dear. It transformed the atmosphere in that hospital. The nurses kept dropping in to get a bit of the spirit. The chaplain came and we celebrated communion. I read passages from the bible. My mum kept saying ‘isn’t this exciting?’ The next day she was even more alert and told us ‘this is a joyous day’. I had never heard my mum use the word ‘joyous’ before.

It was a blessed time with her because we didn’t succumb to the despair of the world around us. We had a hope to celebrate. Death is defeated, Christ has the victory.

When my mother died we celebrated her going home, going to be with God, finding that eternal rest and peace, changed from glory into glory. I reminded her of the inscription that she had written in the bible she bought me for my 23rd birthday: ‘One life to live will soon be past, but to live for Christ will always last.’

Faith makes a difference.

Sermon March 21st 2021 – John 12:20-33

This week I got the text message. I got the message inviting me to book for my Covid vaccine. I hadn’t quite expected it yet, but there it was in my phone in my hand. A sign that a new era is going to come after this most extraordinary year. Perhaps we are all beginning to dare to believe that the writing is on the wall and after the disruption, the fear, the loss, something else is coming.

In today’s passage we are taken back to Jerusalem at a time when there is also a sense of impending change. Jesus has increasingly been telling his disciples that the the teaching, the healing, the prayer and miracles are going to come to an end and that end is just around the corner. To add into the mix, it’s Passover, the great annual festival to celebrate how God’s power and love for the Jewish people brought them out a life of slavery in Egypt and into freedom. For a people living under the brutal military command of the Romans in first Century Palestine when this passage is set, this festival was a welcome reminder that the God who was stronger than Pharoah back then is also the God who is stronger than Rome now.

And this important moment in the Jewish religious calendar brought believers from far and wide to celebrate in Jerusalem.

At the start of today’s passage you might have heard the reference to ‘some Greeks’. The verse reads: ‘Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks’. **Some Greeks**. I found myself getting stuck on this phrase – who were they? They may have travelled miles from Greece itself for the Passover or this might simply be a phrase used to mark that these were non-Jewish people. A phrase used less to indicate who they are and more an indicator of **who they are not**. There were not on the inside. They were foreigners, on the outside of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.

What do we do at this point when we read about these people? Well, if you are anything like me with a tendency to skim read, I think many of us will dismiss them as bit-part characters and want to get back to the main narrative, the usual contenders, the Pharisees, the scribes, and Jesus and his ragtag bunch of followers. That’s where the action is. And it almost seems as if Jesus does that too, when the Greeks tell Philip ‘Sir we want to see Jesus’ and Philip and Andrew take that request to Jesus, on the face of it, he seems to completely sidestep the question. Instead of saying, ‘sure bring them over’, Jesus answers with the more cryptic ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified’.

And what has happened is that these so-called bit part actors, these outsiders, are proven to be profoundly precious to Jesus. They become the catalyst, the moment at which Jesus acknowledges that it is time for him to leave this world. At Cana when Jesus’ mother asks him to produce wine at the wedding and again in the Temple when the authorities were enraged by Jesus’ teaching, we read that Jesus’ hour had not yet come. And now it has. Triggered by ‘some Greeks’.

Jesus has raised Lazarus from the dead, word is spreading like wildfire and these Greeks are representative of all those people who want to know more, who want an invitation to meet with Jesus. And Jesus knows that by dying – and rising – he will not only glorify himself and God in turn by demonstrating God’s nature and love for this world but he will also enable people far beyond Jerusalem and Judea and across time to meet with him.

I wonder what voices we overlook because they don’t seem to come from the right source, or what voices we dismiss because they challenge our own sense of identity, importance or security?

And that’s just what we see the Pharisees doing in John’s Gospel. The pharisees were largely lay people, like us, they felt that they through their study and understanding of scripture and traditions they had the best handle on how to live the kind of life God wanted. Being so passionate and committed to following God, you’d think they might be excited to hear about this young Jewish man giving sight to blind, announcing that God is near. Only no, instead of being delighted, the Pharisees are incensed. They had the right ideas therefore this young man can only be a threat. It’s easy to cast the Pharisees as the villains in this piece but if we are honest, how many of us are more likely to choose tradition over listening to what God is doing, hold firm to our understanding of church rather than make space for new ideas? Especially if they are quite as radical as Jesus’!

The verse directly before today’s passage strikes me as something that could be straight out of today’s news headlines. After crowds of people continue to share their stories of Jesus and his power and compassion, the jealousy and animosity of the pharisees spills out in verse 19 as they say to one another: ‘See, you can do nothing, look, the world has gone after him’.

People in the spotlight bring out all kinds of emotions and our response to them can say more about us than the unenviable person at the mercy of the media and public opinion. I find it remarkable how many people have attempted to deny the experience of Meghan Markle, speaking as a black American woman of her life within the Royal institution. Whatever our thoughts about the wisdom or the timing of her speaking – and indeed of Harry - how can any of us claim to know more about her lived-out experience than she does? And what opportunities for learning are we missing out on by dismissing her words? Since the killing of Sarah Everard as she walked home in London earlier this month many women have been moved to challenge a **culture of disbelief** when women speak about their **own** experiences of being unheard, of feeling unsafe, of abuse. Last week the WHO released new data showing that one in three women globally, around 736 million women, have been subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes. Many women speaking out since the start of the #Metoo movement share how previously they were scared of the consequences, they doubted they would be heard, questioned how it might reflect on them. Perhaps they would be seen as being oversensitive, lacking in a sense of humour or maybe in some quarters simply dismissed because they are a woman.

Perhaps inspired by the number of women sharing their experiences of being unheard, this week for the first time ever I reported a post in a social media group I belong to in which a man gave graphic and demeaning detail of sexual encounters with a young woman which represented her as a mere recipient of his entitled entertainment. I haven’t heard back from the group’s administrator.

In hearing of the ‘Greeks’ desire to see him Jesus tells Andrew and Philip that unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.

This passage is a parallel to the Garden of Gethsemane passages in the other Gospels where Jesus knows he is shortly to be arrested and killed. We know that he is about to lay down his life for people not yet even born, you and I, who are far from bit-part actors, but who are loved endlessly and invited right into the heart of the Easter story. And that willing submission to torture, humiliation, abandonment and death on our behalf makes the Easter story hard to journey through. Only here in today’s passage, although Jesus is troubled, we also have a sense of his eyes being on the life-giving outcome of the pain he is about to endure. Our role in the story today is to work out how we respond to that gift of new life.

In verse 32 Jesus says ‘When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself’. All people. Not just those who know the Lord’s Prayer, who went to university, have a job, live in the global north or have thousand of subscribers on their Youtube channel. All people. The Greek word for all people is ‘pantas’. You might recognise the ‘pan’ in there as meaning all, such as in panorama ‘all the view’, the Pantheon in Rome where all the gods were worshipped and more currently of course, the pandemic, declared a year ago.

As the pandemic begins to lose its grip – in the UK at least – it seems that just as Jesus recognised the hour, this is a vital moment to assess our relationships with all people, with God, with the world. As we step into a new future, what things, habits, mindsets do we need to let go of, allow to die, so that God’s kingdom can take root and together we can bear much fruit?

After this morning’s service we will have our annual church meeting over Zoom and a chance to start looking ahead to what kind of church we want to be.

We don’t know if those Greeks got to see Jesus. I hope they did. But what we do know is that because of the seed that Jesus planted, because of the new life that his resurrection brings for all people, this Easter we can celebrate that no-one is on the outside – we are named, known and loved.

The worship at our synod meeting last Saturday spoke of how policies within our church only break down barriers and let other people in if we take the lead from Jesus, let go of our preconceptions about who should be heard and allow change to take place within our hearts. Movingly, we heard of nine URC resolutions made since 1980 to promote equality and combat racism, sexism and prejudice against people with disabilities and were challenged to reflect on what changes we need to make to express Jesus’ sacrificial radical love of reconciliation and new life.

I am going to end with the words spoken at the start of that worship by Richard and Virginia Becher:

*Over many years promises have been made, many policies written and resolutions passed, but there are still people who feel they don’t belong to this country, this community or OUR Church. They are welcomed with words, but there is no place for them at the table and their stories are not heard. More policies, renewed promises and new resolutions will not help them belong unless as individuals we open our hearts with a welcome and see in them the Christ of our faith. The Kingdom of God is a place where everyone belongs together so we all have a responsibility to seek it and see it in each other*

*Sarah Everard: How a woman's death sparked a nation's soul-searching* [*https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56384600*](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56384600)

**Prayers of Intercession**

As we remember all those who are adversely treated
because of their place of origin or their skin tone,
we pray for the time to come when all people
will rejoice in the diversity of different colours and races,
different cultures and backgrounds.

As we remember those who are vulnerable,
frightened to leave their homes for fear of street crimes,
we pray for the time to come when violence will be no more
and all will live in security and safety.

As we remember those who have suffered abuse at the hands of friend or stranger,
and who bear the scars physical, mental and emotional,
we pray for the time when all women and all men will respect each other,
and where children will not fear violence or abuse.

As we remember those whose human rights are ignored,
those used as political pawns in disputes between nations,
those who live in constant fear of the bomb or the bullet,
and as we especially remember for the people of Myanmar and Yemen,
we pray for the time when peace will reign throughout the world.

As we remember those who are alone and isolated,
those who mourn,
those who are ill and those who look after loved ones,
and as we especially remember…
we pray for the time when there will be no more pain or tears
and when all will live in full community.

Loving Lord, as we look upon each other
may we see your image which we all share;
may we love as we are loved,
and may we welcome as we have been welcomed by you.

In your name we pray.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Welcoming God,
thank you for the welcome that Jesus offers out of his great love for all people.
Help us to follow his example.