25th July 2021

Call to worship

Let us bring ourselves to God,
whatever our age and gifts.
Let us prepare to share in worship,
giving thanks for all that God shares with us.
Let us open our hearts and minds
to know more of God’s unconditional love and care,
and be ready to share it with others.

**As the deer pants for the water**

**A prayer of adoration**

Hospitable God,
extravagant provider,
we worship you because we can.
You take our inadequacies, our limitations,
and pour out your blessings upon us.
We stand in awe of you,
sensing your presence among us.
Overwhelmed by your kindness,
we fall at your feet.
**Amen.**



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

With our time and with our money:
**forgive us, Lord, when we have not been generous.**
In helping others, and being hospitable:
**forgive us, Lord, when we have not been generous.**
When we have been blessed with so much:
**forgive us, Lord, when we have not been generous.**
When we could have gone the extra mile and shared what we have:
**forgive us, Lord, when we have not been generous.**
In using our resources, gifts and talents:
**forgive us, Lord, when we have not been generous.**
**Most generous God,**
**help us to be more like you.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God, you forgive us when we make mistakes,
when we have not shared what you have given us.
We come to the cross knowing that we are healed and forgiven,
and given a second chance to be the people you call us to be.
**Amen.**



**Jesus take me as I am**

Open Mike

**Revelation 2.18-29**

School’s out for summer; Restrictions have officially been lifted. Time to party, right?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Well, yes and no.

As government restrictions end, some people are celebrating and never want to see a mask again. Yet others are nervous about the impact this might have. However, we ourselves feel about it all, I think our following of the way of Jesus and loving our nieghbour as our self will make us sensitive to different people’s needs and feelings. Sharing small acts of consideration as we all move into a new phase together can go a huge way to bringing people comfort.

It goes the other way too. Thoughtless comments, hurtful jokes, flippant remarks can have a huge impact – even years later. This week, an inconsiderate joke made by the director of the Olympic games opening ceremony, Kentaro Kobayashi, over thirty years ago has cost him his job.

Footage of Kobayashi from the 1990s recently emerged in which he appears to make jokes about the Holocaust.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Japan's Olympic chief Seiko Hashimoto said the video ridiculed "painful facts of history".

The dismissal is the latest in a string of scandals to hit the Games.

Since the start of the year, three other organisers have been forced to step down from Tokyo 2020 - and the games have already been postponed because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

* Earlier this week, a composer quit the team creating the ceremony after it emerged he had bullied classmates with disabilities at school
* In March, Olympics' creative chief Hiroshi Sasaki quit after suggesting that plus-size comedian Naomi Watanabe could appear as an "Olympig". He later apologised
* And in February, Yoshiro Mori was forced to step down as the head of the organising committee after he made remarks about women that were criticised as "inappropriate". Mr Mori was quoted as saying women talked too much and that meetings with many female board directors would "take a lot of time".

Regrading the latest scandal Mr Kobayashi himself has issued a statement responding to his dismissal.

"Entertainment should not make people feel uncomfortable. I understand that my stupid choice of words at that time was wrong, and I regret it," it said.

Have no doubt, our small words and actions, shared with others, can make a massive difference. We can sometimes excuse hurtful comments or actions as ‘banter’ or ‘just having a laugh?’

 The line between tolerance and intolerance is something that is very much a contemporary issue for our society.

In Japan, Robert Whiting, author of Tokyo Junkie, a book that details his nearly 60 years living in the city has said "the culture and tradition is to avoid conflict and argument. It's not like in America where you have that public to-and-fro.

"Generally the more famous you are the more tight-lipped you are. You don't want any controversy, you don't want it to reflect on your team-mates, your organisation or sponsors.

"Individualism is a very valued thing in the West, not in Japan. Here, harmony is the most important thing."[[3]](#endnote-3)

The issues of tolerance and intolerance are big questions for the church. Are we too tolerant of somethings when we should be intolerant of them? Are we intolerant of other things when we should be more tolerant?

What is the Spirit saying to the church?

As we continue with that question looking at the letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation, we come to look at the church at Thyatira. Thyatira was a commercial town. It was well known for its trade guilds and not least its smelting work in copper and bronze. That may well explain the choice of the description of Jesus in verse 18: that his feet were like burnished (or exquisite) bronze. More importantly, the local deity in the area, the patron deity of the bronze trade was Apollo Tyrimnaeus who appeared on local coins together with the son of God, that is the Roman Emperor. Granted these associations there is particular power in the opening title of Jesus as THE Son of God. His eyes are like burning fire – there is something awesome and even terrifying about this description – it suggests the penetrating gaze which strips away the disguise and sees to the heart of things. The bronze feet implies an immovable, inflexible strength and power. A message that begins like that will certainly not be a soothing tranquilizer.

Yet it starts with the highest praise.

*I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first*. Verse 19

Those great qualities often come in pairs. Service is the outcome of love and perseverance the product of faith.

During this pandemic I hope we can hear the Lord give thanks for the love and faith, service, and perseverance of us in the local church.

I was really touched last week when Clare ended her sermon and made us think of the white stone that the Risen Christ gives the church in Pergamum with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it and to make us prayerfully be open to consider what encouraging and affirming name Jesus would give to us. Debbie found a couple of white stones on the beach in Wales, and we have held on to them since.

Whilst I was away, we had the sad news that John Palmer died. John was a faithful Christian minister with an evangelistic heart. We are preparing to give thanks to God for his life and will be finding the appropriate words to sum up his life. I know Kathryn was touched when someone described John as a person who took Jesus into every room he entered. That’s beautiful. What words would you hope the Lord say about you?

*Nevertheless*, the letter continues: *I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet.*

The problem in the church in Thyatira was identified by allusion to an infamous biblical figure. Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab and seems to be the cause of some her husband’s wickedness as detailed in 1 Kings 16-22. She comes to an unpleasant end in 2 kings 9. Jezebel was a foreign woman who introduced the worship of Baal, the fertility god, into Israel. That was at the heart of many other evils summarized in 2 kings 9.22 as idolatry and witchcraft. The colourful metaphors of adultery and sexual immorality are often metaphors in scripture for spiritual ‘playing around’ of communing with other gods, though they may also mean literally sexual immorality.

Part of the problem in Thyatira was that the local industries and many trade and business guilds were formed around different religious practices and values which they hoped would bless their trade. As in our day, many people will have taken these ceremonies with a pinch of salt. But in this letter Jesus makes it very clear that that is not an option.

Whilst the risen Christ is impressed by the seemingly strong and flourishing church, their abounding energy and service – there is something missing. A church could seem to be alive and busy but do its people come to be entertained, to better themselves and get some advantage from belonging, instead of being challenged, or instructed and confronted with the fact of sin and the offer of salvation. Was it a highly successful club rather than a congregation of disciples devoted to solely following the Risen Christ?

Tolerating Jezebel and her prophecies may refer to someone who is having an influence in the church by bringing prophecies, or teachings that have a seductive influence on the purity of the life and worship of the Christian church. It seems that they had no wish to destroy the church but wished instead to bring into its new ways and new practices which were in fact destructive of the faith. Jezebel was code name for those who wish to alter Christianity to suit themselves and be more aligned with the values of the world around them and who think they can improve on the teachings and way of Jesus.

This Jezebel is accused of two things of misleading people into sexual immorality and into food sacrificed to idols.

Let’s take the second of those things first as we can be surer of what it means. One of the great problems of the early Christian church was the problem of meat sacrificed to idols. Paul discusses the problem in 1 Corinthians 8-10. Many festival meals and gatherings of trade and business guilds involved religious ceremonies with food sacrificed to idols. Here was the Christian problem. Should a Christian go to such meals in pagan temples? Could they eat the food dedicated to other gods? To us it sounds a very remote question but to the early Christians it was a question of discipleship and loyalty and had huge consequences. If you didn’t associate and partake you could be cut off from social fellowship with non-Christians and also your business and trade would suffer. There were social and financial consequences in other words. Here is where Jezebel comes in by saying it doesn’t really matter. Don’t commit commercial suicide by standing up for your beliefs. You have got to make money. That is more important than the claims of Christ.

The second part of Jezebels teaching is not so clear. It could be about flirting with other value systems and deities, not being exclusive in your worship and beliefs. So, for instance, there is no need for those Christians to refuse to say, ‘Caesar is lord’, that there is no harm in conforming to outward rituals and ceremonies of pagan worship. You can save yourself a lot of trouble and grief and accusations that you are arrogant or exclusive or bigoted.

Of course, if you do that – you can end up dead – as it predicted here in verse 23: *I will strike her children dead.* Because what defines you as a church? What do you stand for? If you are all things to all people, if there is nothing special or important about being part of a church that you would find somewhere else – why bother?

The criticism could also literally mean sexual immorality, in the sense that taking part in the pagan practices of the day often meant sexual permissiveness, the use of temple prostitutes as part of worship to those deities and such like.

The letter goes on to say that the rest of the church at Thyatira have not learned Satan’s so called deep secrets. This is a reference to a kind of belief that was not uncommon among pagan thinkers of the time. Some of them held it was the plain duty to experience every kind of sin and pleasure. The real achievement was to allow the body to try everything going and to keep the soul and spirit entirely unaffected. The test was to indulge in pleasure to the limit and not be conquered by it. It was training for the soul. It has some parallels to that old idea of letting the young go out and sow their wild oats before they settle down! Jezebel may have been teaching that it was a duty to have sexual license in order to train the soul.

All of which, to sum up, suggests that the Jezebel in this congregation, whoever they were, was encouraging the church to accommodate to the values of the world around them and not to rigidly reject all the worlds practices. Meet the world halfway.

It is in the mercy of God that the teaching of Jezebel and her like didn’t become the view of the church.

Paul in his letter to the Romans (12.2) urges Christians:

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing, and perfect will*.

Jesus had said that we can’t serve two masters: God or money. He said the greatest commandment is to love God and the second was to love your neighbour as yourself. We must make choices about where our loyalties lie.

If you are faithful, the promise Jesus gives is that you will have authority over the nations a reference to Psalm 2 – a picture of being a royal priesthood. This is for all those who are not drawn away from the teaching and practices of Jezebel and how hold on tightly. This is a word for all those Christians today who find themselves in places and churches where teaching and behavior is not the way of Jesus and where the way of Jesus is not being eagerly embraced and hailed as God given. We are tolerating other stuff that we know isn’t from the way of Christ.

I know it is an open discission as to what is the way of Christ and we constantly be reminded of the teaching of Christ in scripture. But it is important to be asking that question in all we do – is this the way of Jesus?

Whilst we shouldn’t tolerate some things, in other ways we should be more tolerant.

When for example a celebrity posts something that might be interpreted as denigrating someone of another ethnicity, they are instantly labelled as racist. They then usually deny it and say that some of their best friends are black, Asian, whatever, equating to the group they have offended. Finding someone to own up to the label of racist, homophobic, or sexist is pretty hard. Yet the presence of racism, homophobia and sexism in our society is obvious in everyone who has eyes to see it. That’s why its much more helpful to think of racist or sexist acts or attitudes rather than people. If we’re honest all of us have a small part inside that doesn’t understand, trust or appreciate those who are different to us. We are all unconsciously biased in some way and occasionally that bias slips out, but using adjectives like these to define a person, as if that is all they are, doesn’t help.

Hate the sin, love the sinner, was an old adage that bears some reflection. We are all caught up in a flawed world. But Jesus loves us and tolerate us. The way of Jesus is to tolerate the sinner not the sin. There is forgiveness and the chance of repentance, change, transformation through Him. That is the great tolerance and the great hope -rather than being cast off into outer darkness and designated bad, unredeemable, in some binary contrasts between the good and the bad, the right and the wrong.

Yet we are still called to faithfulness – to holding on to what we believe and who we believe.

Is this the way of Jesus - if we truly believe he is the Son of God, the beginning, and the end, the one who holds the keys of life and death?

Instead of giving us a white stone with a new name written on it, as Jesus promised the church at Pergamum, here the church at Thyatira will be given the morning star. Later in the book 22.16, Jesus himself is described as the morning star and so we probably have another hint of the level of intimacy which he offers to his people. He will share his identity with them, as he will his royal authority. But the morning star, most likely the planet Venus at its pre-dawn brightest, is a sign of the special vocation of Christians, not least those holding on when others around them are compromising under pressure with local worldly values and practices. Christian witness is meant to be a sign of the dawning of a new day, the day in which love, faith, service and perseverance will have their fulfilment, in which idolatry and immorality will be seen as the snares and delusions they really are and in which Jesus the risen Son of God will establish his glorious gracious reign over the whole world.

May God help us to hold on to faith and shine like the morning star.

**Prayers of intercession**

Faithful God who loves and delights in us,
Thank you that you see and know us. You tolerate us in all our failings, our flaws, our weakness and our sin.

Thankyou for the hope we have through Jesus that you, the centre of existence are love. Continue your work of transformation we pray.

Challenge and guide us, if only we have ears to hear.
Make us intolerant of all that exploits and oppresses. Make us intolerant of anything that may turn us away from your ways of righteousness and mercy or justice and peace.
In the certain knowledge of your love, empower us to respond,
revealing to us the threads that bind your kingdom,
and showing us how to contribute.
May your kingdom come on earth, just as it is in heaven,

Many places are experiencing the effects of climate change now.
We think of our own high temperatures of late and the unprecedented high temperatures in Canada. The wild fires in America. The floods in Western Europe.
All these destroy lives and livelihoods.
We lift before you all those affected.

Lord, you feed your hungry people in more ways than one. During these past months many ordinary people whose businesses were closed stepped up to feed others within their communities.
We pray now for your hand on the recovery of all businesses, particularly those in hospitality. May our highstreets and communities flourish once more.
Many charities have found donations dwindling. Lord, multiply what little they have. Bless and proser those who seek the best values and principles to live and work by.

We pray for those who are ill, suffering, the persecuted, the destitute and the breaeved. Especially we remember the family of John palmer at this time, holding them in prayer and giving thanks for his life and witness.

Lord, we pray for your church. Pray that all in leadership will be guided by Godly wisdom at all times. We pray that people who found church on the web during lockdown will want to come and experience the fellowship of services.
But however they attend church, whether it be walking through the door or via social media, we pray your church will always be welcoming, offering warm hospitality to those who are seeking. May we bright a bright star shining forth as a witness to your inclusive love.

**Lord, we offer you our prayers in the name of Jesus.**

**Amen**



**Notices:**

Songs of Praise 6pm at St Barts Coaley. Indoors – asked to wear masks but you are allowed to sing.

Pop Up Café on Wednesday 10.30am to 12.30pm in our Church Garden.

**Sending out**

May you continue in love and faith, service and perseverance

And shine like the morning star

May the blessing of God be with you.

Amen

1. *Lucy Carman* https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/114-july-august-2021-b/proper-12/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-57924885 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/olympics/57841166 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)