**4th July 2021**

**Call to worship**

The greatness and power of God
are such a contrast to our weakness –
yet, our God loves us.
The holiness and goodness of God
are such a contrast to our sinful nature –
yet, our God loves us.
Come, offer your praise and thanksgiving,
and give glory and honour to our God.



**A gathering prayer**

Lord God, King of the universe,
we thank you for sending your Son, our Saviour,
as a helpless and vulnerable baby,
dependent on the love and care of flawed human beings.
As we come to worship,
may we make ourselves vulnerable –
open to receive more of your power, mercy and love –
so that we can share that with others,
when we are sent to serve you.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Heavenly Father, heavenly King,
we come before you today just as we are.
We come to listen and to learn.
We come and lay everything down
to be in your awesome presence.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Loving God, all-sufficient one,
we acknowledge your presence and we worship you.
**We adore you, Lord of all.**
We worship you, Lord Jesus Christ, holy and anointed one.
You laid your life down that we might live.
**We adore you, Lord of all.**
We welcome your authority and influence in our lives, Holy Spirit.
You intercede for us when we have no strength.
You are with us and guide us in our weakness.
**We adore you, Lord of all.**
Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are worthy of all our praise:
**we adore you, Lord of all.**
**Amen.**



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

We bow before you, O God,
and we confess that we have let you down.
We have turned away from you and gone our own way.
We have allowed material things to dominate our lives,
and to occupy our minds.
We are sorry, and we lay everything at your feet.
We are sorry that we overcomplicate everything.
Help us to learn how to be still and know that you are God.
Help us to seek simplicity, to slow down and not to hurry,
to require nothing more than what you give,
and to fear being vulnerable,
so that we can be complete in your presence.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Jesus Christ, you died and rose again
that we might be released from all the worldly things
that weigh us down.
Thank you that we are forgiven,
that our chains are gone,
and we have been set free to serve you once again.
**Amen.**

**Revelation 2.8-11**

This sermon was written in faith and hope that England would prevail in the quarter final of the Euros over Ukraine, and we would be excited to learn more about our football heroes!

One of England's most talented footballers, Raheem Sterling, who is our top scorer in the tournament, has described his Christian faith as "massive".

Speaking to former political spin doctor turned writer Alistair Campbell, he said: "[My faith is] massive to me. I always give thanks for my life, always give thanks for my family's life and I'm just really grateful for the position I'm in.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sterling, 24, says he was brought up in the church and his mum taught him about faith from an early age.

When he moved from home he says his faith deepened and now has "no doubts" that God exists.

"I know for sure," he said. "Every day you wake up, you just look around and you don't need to look any further than what you see.

"A lot of scientists, the cleverest people in the world tell you that there has to be a creator. And they need answers, but you just have to sometimes accept that it's bigger than you and you have to leave it at that."

Sterling also opened up about the racism he's been on the end of and how he deals with critics. He was recently awarded the MBE because of his work for racial equality in sport. But he has faced relentless criticism and bad press which he has had to deal with.

Christians get a bad press and a lot of criticism that we have to deal with in our contemporary secular society. Sometimes we deserve it, most of the time it is unfair and a caricature. The depressing thing is we, as Christians, can even start believing it and think we are a bunch of losers, and our faith is irrelevant and unbelievable and boring.

As I said a few weeks ago, over this summer I will be looking at the Book of Revelation during these sermon slots. During our recent Day of Prayer at Pentecost I used the reflections from the URC daily devotions on the letters to the seven churches in the Book of revelation – contained in chapters 2-3. They were originally written to ask the question ‘what is the Spirit saying to the church?’ It seemed timely to be asking the same question now.

The second letter is to the church at Smyrna.

Smyrna lies forty miles north of Ephesus.  It was an important seaport at the mouth of the Hermus River.  It was a flourishing city and in 23 AD had been awarded the honour of building the first temple dedicated to worshiping the Roman emperor Tiberius.  It was about 60 years later that it became compulsory for every Roman citizen to worship the emperor.  This was very difficult for the Christians who could only call Jesus “Lord” and not the emperor.  [[2]](#endnote-2)

As we live in the UK where Christianity is legal and generally acceptable, we can only imagine how hard it was for the people in places such as Smyrna.  We must not forget that in many parts of the world Christians are being persecuted today. Our persecution is soft persecution: ridicule, ignorance and isolation.

In our society many will want you to bow the knee and worship their idols. Footballers literally bow the knee to raise awareness of racial injustice. Everywhere you go you see companies and community bodies displaying their support for diversity and the LGBTQ community. Personally, I have nothing against that. I’m glad the Methodist Church this week voted to permit same sex marriage, like we in the URC did five years ago. I hope and pray that when we come to discuss this matter again in a few years in this church we will have a larger majority in favour of it.

But not because we want to conform to society expectations and the pressure of the world’s values and bow the knee to those things.

But because we bow the knee to Jesus. Because I believe that is what Jesus wants.

I believe he would want to support committed loving relationships between two people – as it reflects the love of God for us. That is the heart for what marriage is all about, regardless of what the sexuality of those two people are. The majority of course will be heterosexual couples, but God’s rich diversity means that we are all different, beautifully so. Jesus went out of his way to include those of his day that the majority excluded because they thought they were different, unclean, sinners, marginalized. Jesus showed love and grace and inclusion towards them not judgement or condemnation. So for me, because Jesus is Lord, the first and the Last, as his title is here in this reading from Revelation, he shapes my attitude to others. I bow the knee to him and I believe he would be passionately about making a fair and equal society were people were all people are treated with respect and dignity.

I’m always suspicious when people want you to sign up to their campaign. It can be as though this is their god, their idol. The values and beliefs that form the core of their identity, what gives their life meaning and purpose. As a Christian, I’d say although those campaigns and values and beliefs may be good and worth signing up for, I’d say there is more. We are created, however diversely, to have a relationship with our Creator. Restoring that relationship with God will give ultimate meaning and purpose for your life, and a power for living as you know God through the Holy Spirit. That can empower your desire to change the world as the spirit changes you.

These Christians in the first century were being accused of all sorts of things. In Smyrna they faced the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan. Satan in scripture is shorthand for the accuser, the father of lies and slander. It seems likely that the local synagogue has been a centre for accusing the Christians of all kinds of wickedness. They are under attack for their faith in Jesus.

There is hope in this letter.  We need hope.  We have been through a year that has seen so many changes to our normal way of life.  Churches have been closed for long periods.  The churches have had an existential threat to our survival. We are half the size we were. Some people have come back to worship with us and take part in the limited activities we have been able to do over the last year or so. Some have stayed distant, whether for shielding or other reasons. Some have drifted and got out of the church habit. Some have been attracted, curious about what we believe and do. More people are “attending” online services than attended services in churches.  We are rich and yet we are also poor.

The message to the church in Smyrna “Do not fear what you are about to suffer” would have been good to receive last year as this pandemic took hold.  It is still a positive message to take ahold of now. ‘Do not be afraid of what you suffer?’.

Most of our attitudes towards the pandemic seem to be about loses and sacrifices. We have sacrificed our freedom, we have lost a sense of community, our church is diminished, we can’t sing, we can’t meet, we have lost people and momentum and things aren’t the same. This saying, which spoke to me powerfully when I was taking part in the day of Prayer for Pentecost the other month made me sit up and reflect that we are often traumatized by fear of what is happening and will be for the future. Fear is not a good emotion. It does stuff to you that usually isn’t healthy nor faith filled.

When Jesus speaks to this church he tells them not to be afraid. Constantly in scripture when the divine encounters the human Jesus says, God says, angels say ‘Do not be afraid’. It challenges us to move and act in faith, and trust in God. In our context, ‘not to be afraid of the suffering’ challenged me to see the positives that this pandemic may have brought. To recast the perspective and attitude.

Why should we not be afraid? Well, if the pandemic has taken away many of our freedoms maybe we have been forced to go back to what is essential in life: The relationships we have, and especially our relationship with God or not? How good are those relationships? With our relationship with God - are we keeping our faith alive and vital?

During the last year we have tried to help people look at how to pray and deepen our prayer life. How mindfulness can help us be present to ourselves and God. How we can understand our faith deeper and Christian doctrine. How to read scripture and listen for God speaking. How to keep in touch with other Christians. How to serve others?

 If we have come out of all that with our faith strengthened, then that will be a positive of the pandemic? It will have given us a clearer perspective on what matters – how to go forward for the rest of our lives. How to reshape our church as a result. How to be committed to the core of our being and our beliefs. Inevitably some may have decided otherwise and drifted off. But those who are left will be the conquerors – to use this language in Revelation. The faithful. Those who know a deeper life and have the victors crown, as the letter to the church at Smyrna metaphorically describes. They will not even be hurt by death – because they have a hope in Christ that is stronger than death and that though we are poor, we are rich.

We can still hold onto this and trust that if we are faithful, we will receive the crown of life.

Just as the people of Smyrna were to listen, we need to keep our ears open to hear what God is saying to us today. We need to hold onto the truth and reject false messages and false messengers.  We need to be “Walking the Way” of Jesus. If we are, we can be sure that we will inherit the crown of life.

**Prayers of intercession**

Loving God we thank you for all you give us.
We know that we don’t deserve your love, but we thank you that your love is unconditional.
We pray for those who are being persecuted for their faith,
We ask that you give these persecuted people your strength.
We pray for all who have suffered through this pandemic and as many put their trust in vaccines may we also keep our faith in you.
Help us to hold onto our faith so we might receive the crown of crowns.
We bring our prayers in the name of Jesus.
Amen

*John Collings, Lay Preacher, Rutherglen URC*

Lord, just as you sent out your disciples of old to share the Gospel, we pray today for all people who serve in the field of mission, at home or abroad. For all those in ministry and leadership within the church. For all those making themselves vulnerable by sharing of you.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Strengthen and protect your people sharing the Gospel.**

We pray for the conflicts and tensions raging throughout the world – hatred, bombings, corruption. We pray for all those caught up in such situations. And for the people working to bring about reconciliation.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Diffuse hatred and bring peace to the world.**

We pray for all countries struggling to cope with the pandemic due to lack of resources and vaccines. For India coping with another epidemic. For those everywhere who are sick; be it in mind or body. For those who put their own lives at risk to help save others. For the bereaved.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Restore health, comfort and console.**

We pray for those in our community who may have lost their jobs due to the pandemic or have been furloughed and are worrying about rent arrears. Or their future, as furlough begins to wind down. For all those living on the streets with only a cardboard roof over their heads.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Bring reassurance; transform lives.**

When the disciples were sent out, they were instructed to take no food with them. We pray for all people who live each day not knowing where their next meal is coming from. For all those who rely on aid or food banks to put a meal on the table.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Feed and nourish those in need.**

Lord, in you we have freedom. We pray for our Prime Minister, the government and all advisors as they deliberate on lifting restrictions as we head to what society has dubbed ‘Freedom Day’.

**Merciful God sufficient, we lift our prayers before you.
Give wisdom and guidance in all things.
May all people know true freedom in you.
Amen.**

**Blessing**

Help us to be faithful to you O God and win the victors crown of life.

May your blessing be on us.

1. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/i-ve-got-no-doubt-that-god-exists-raheem-sterling-opens-up-on-christian-faith?_psrc=personyzePopularVideos&utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12462609_Voice%20of%20hope%2023.06.2021&dm_i=16DQ,7F47L,KCOFX7,U4Z7A,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://devotions.urc.org.uk/devotions/2021/05/15/urc-daily-devotion-saturday-15th-may-2021/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)