**8th August 2021**

**Call to worship**

When we journey with God, anything is possible:
**we are challenged to push our limits.**
When we walk closely with Jesus, anything is possible:
**we are reminded that everyone has their own story to tell.**
When we welcome the Holy Spirit, anything is possible:
**we are invited to share in the bread of heaven that always satisfies.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Limitless God,
thank you that we cannot contain you,
that you are unfathomable and always up to something!
We worship and adore you.
Just when we think we have worked it all out, you surprise us!
Gracious God, we are truly blessed by you.
Thank you, that as we bow down humbly at your throne,
we know that only you can satisfy our needs.
Praise you, Lord God.
**Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

When we make wrong assumptions about others and judge the way they live:
**forgive us, Lord, for limiting people and possibilities.**

When we don’t allow others to speak out and be the people you have called them to be:
**forgive us, Lord, for limiting people and possibilities.**

When we cast judgements on particular communities or neighbourhoods that are different from ours:
**forgive us, Lord, for limiting people and possibilities.**

Let us journey together towards wholeness and healing, knowing that only God can sustain us and set us free.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Giver and sustainer of life,
through the power of the cross
we are a forgiven people,
a royal priesthood, a holy nation,
chosen by you
who has called us out of darkness into your marvellous light.
**Amen.**



**Revelation 3.7-13**

There have been many memorable moments in the Olympics, which finished this weekend. This week we saw the return of Simone Biles, the American gymnast, to the Olympic stage after a turbulent time at the Olympic Games.[[1]](#endnote-1) Biles, one of the greatest gymnasts of all time, was expected to return home with armfuls of medals, having qualified for all four individual finals as well as the individual and team all-around events. However, after a shaky vault at the beginning of the team all-around, [she withdrew from the event](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/olympics/58045046) – and the subsequent four. In a press conference afterwards, she said, ‘I have to focus on my mental health…We have to protect our minds and our bodies and not just go out and do what the world wants us to do.’

What assumptions do you think people have made about Simone Biles both before this year’s Games and after speaking out about her mental health? What do you think the ‘world’ wanted her to do? A little bit of research reveals that [the athlete has not had an easy life](https://news.sky.com/story/simone-biles-how-olympic-star-overcame-childhood-hunger-and-sexual-abuse-to-become-worlds-greatest-gymnast-12360524), suffering from childhood hunger, living for a time in foster care, being subjected to sexual abuse within the gymnastics world, and seeing her brother charged with and acquitted of murder.

Do these facts alter any of the assumptions people might make about her?

[Commenting on Biles’ decision](https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/57983879), ex-gymnast Beth Tweddle said, ‘She was strong enough to say: 'I'm just not right today,’ prioritizing her own wellbeing and proving she was able to remove herself from the expectations and assumptions of what the world hoped she was capable of.

Biles life and mental health had been shaken and she took action to try and recover. She had to lay aside people’s expectations of her and find her way again.

This pandemic has disturbed our normality and shaken our everyday living. It has displaced our certainties and the expectations of life. It has shaken our church and called us to reassess what we do and how we do it.

We continue our look into the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation asking the question then and now “What is the Spirit saying to the church?’

This week we look at the letter to the church in Philadelphia. Philadelphia was situated in what is now central Turkey. It was the Greek word for ‘the one who loves his brother’ – after Attalus the Second founded the city in the second century BC in affection for his brother. It was a strategic city on the main highway into the interior. It was founded with the deliberate intention that it might be a missionary of Greek culture and language to the areas of Lydia and Phrygia.

That is behind the saying in verse 8 where the Risen Christ says ‘*See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.’*

Three centuries ago, Philadelphia had been given an open door to spread Greek ideas in the lands beyond. Now there is another great missionary opportunity, an open door to carry to that part of the world the message of the love of Christ.

But Philadelphia also had another great characteristic that had left its mark on this letter. It was on the edge of a great volcanic plain. The land was fertile, but it was also unstable. In 17 AD there had been a devastating earthquake and the tremors went on for years. Philadelphia had been described as a city full of earthquakes. Shocks were an everyday occurrence. Most of the population had to live outside the city in huts and feared going into the city in case they were killed by falling masonry. Those who stayed in the city were considered mad. They spent their time shoring up shaking buildings and every now and again fleeing for their lives to open spaces.

So, in verses 11-12 the risen Christ says*: I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown.****12****The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it*

Finally, there is one more thing about Philadelphia’s context and past. When the earthquake devastated the city, emperor Tiberius was generous towards them and didn’t impose any taxes, so they could rebuild. They were so grateful they changed the city’s name to Neo Caesarea – the New City of Caesar. The new names didn’t last but it is behind the verse 12:

*I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name.*

Three things I want to comment on then: The open door. The pillars of the church that were shaken. The new name.

But first of all notice the names of Jesus as this letter starts*: These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.*

Holy and true: to say Jesus is holy is to say that he reflects the character of God, the Holy One. Jesus brings us the truth about God – what god’s true nature is – perfect love. Holy literally means different, separate from. God is holy, different from us. Jesus shares the life of God. The great claim of scripture is that we are made holy in Christ. As we invite Christ into our lives, we get to share his holiness – his nature, his communion with God. We don’t deserve4 it, we are not worthy, but he is worthy, and we are made holy in Him.

He holds the key of David. This is a symbol of authority, like the steward who was appointed over God’s house in Isaiah 22.22the royal key that will open, or lock, any, and every door. Jesus is the door, as the scriptures proclaim, who can open the gates to God’s house for you. Isn’t that wonderful? What a promise?

The first Christians were convinced that Jesus was the way the truth the life, the gate, the door, the key – all these metaphors to try and describe the importance of Christ for life and death and why it was worth holding on to faith in him despite all the suffering and persecution and temptations that life may bring.

The church at Philadelphia seemed to have opposition from the local synagogue who didn’t take to this community of people proclaiming that Jesus was the Messiah and that God had raised him from the dead. In the letters of the New Testament, we get the early Christian debates about who are the true people of God? Is it through inheritance and genealogy that you are born into the people of God -or is it a community of those who put their faith in God and now those who follow the Messiah, Jesus? The risen Jesus in this letter tells the church to hang in there and despite the attacks they are receiving one day there will be a role reversal and their persecutors will come and fall at their feet and acknowledge that they got it wrong and that I, Jesus, have loved you’.

We all know that the Christian faith is out of favour in our country at the moment. We can feel like we are on the losing side. No one seems interested in what we have to offer at the moment. We can debate whether that is our fault for not being attractive enough or faithful enough, or the temptations and distractions of our material and secular world is pulling people away from faith. But the big questions are still there.

At John Palmer’s funeral on Thursday, I said John’s standard address at funerals was to say, ‘when you die you will be expected, welcomed, and loved by your heavenly Father’.

Attending any funeral is a reminder of our mortality. No matter how fit you are, no matter how many vaccinations you have, one day you will die.

Welcomed? Welcomed where? One of life’s big questions is whether this life is all there is. Is there anything after death? If there is, then surely that should shape your life on this earth?

John was a committed Christian, a minister no less of the gospel of Jesus Christ. John believed in God and that because of the resurrection of Jesus, believed that death was not the last word. We would be welcomed into the presence of God at death.

John, an intelligent scientist in his first career, told me it takes as much faith to believe there is nothing after death as it does to believe there is something after death and that you will be welcomed someplace else.

But what kind of welcome awaits? Are we going to fall into the hands of an angry God, maybe a God we didn’t believe in, welcomed to a heaven we thought was a delusion? Will we get a ticking off? Or even worse be sent down to that other place?

Because of Jesus: because Jesus had died on a cross for him; because Jesus had been raised from death for him; because Jesus had ascended to heaven for him, he had confidence that he was loved, accepted and forgiven by the God of love.

Expected, welcomed, and loved.

Do we have the same confidence in our faith? Are we holding on to what we have, as Jesus commends the church in Philadelphia in this letter?

This pandemic has certainly given us an open door – an opportunity to share the hope we have with an anxious world. If normality starts to creep back to our society that open door may soon shut, as people get distracted with the stuff of everyday life again. So, we do need to make the most of what opportunities remain to share our hope and meaning for what life is about. I hope the Illuminate outreach to our young people and the chance to reflect on happiness in some evening café session in the autumn may be strategic and useful ways to open the door for people to find faith. Where else can we find open doors? How can we help people step forward in faith?

The pillars of everyday have been shaken. Simone Biles is not the only one who has had mental health problems. Most of us have had our mental wellbeing challenged in the last 18 months or so. That constant living with low level fear and anxiety works its way through you. Simone Biles got the plaudits for speaking out, standing up, and doing something about it. We pray for all whose foundations have been shaken by this pandemic.

Every proverbial earthquake gives you the opportunity to build back better, to reassess your life, how you live it, what’s important to make it more stabile and resilient. The scriptures say that God is like a rock -solid and immovable and those who lay the foundation of faith can build greater resilience for their lives. Church, despite all its flaws, should be a place to help you build a life of faith.

Jesus says in verse 10:

*Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.*

I will keep you. The word of the risen Christ is that there is nothing which can separate you from Him. Even when time comes to an end and when the world as we know it ceases to exist those who are faithful to Christ will still be safe in the keeping of Christ.

The faithful Christian will be like a pillar in the Temple of God. People talk about people who are pillars of the church. Paul uses that phrase in Galatians (2.9) to describe Peter James and john. I’ve been minister of this church for twenty years now. You were all a lot younger when I first arrived. So was I. During those twenty years I have done the funerals of seventy members of this church. Some of whom you would describe as pillars of the church.

In this last year, this cruel last year, we have lost more than the average number of church members, a loss we want to acknowledge next month on the 12th of September with a service for reflection and thanksgiving for their lives and contribution to ours. But in the last twenty years we have seen over 90 people become church members thank God. There is no room for complacency though. The church is only ever one generation away from extinction.

We are always in need of replacing the pillars, new pillars of the church. What qualifications do you need to be a pillar of the church? You can discuss that - … I guess as a starter for ten it will be about commitment to the church and its work and mission, doing good, serving our community, holding fast to the faith, and sharing that faith with others.

Finally, Jesus will write on the faithful Christian the name of God. And the name of the city of God. They are to be marked out publicly as God’s people, as Jesus’ people.

I was watching the final session of the Olympics yesterday afternoon and it was the women’s high Jump. There was this very tall Australian athlete, Nicola McDermott, who became the first Australian woman to jump over two metres. She won silver.

Nicola McDermott raised her hands before her jump and seemed to be praying. Then after the jump she would write in a journal. She was always smiling. I thought this is suspicious.

Indeed it was. She is a committed Christian. McDermott has co-founded a ministry group, Everlasting Crowns, to help athletes connect with fellow Christians and local chaplains during international competition

As a Christian woman with “Jesus” written on her wrist, she said she hoped she could inspire people.[[2]](#endnote-2)

“As a teenager, I was always an outcast, and I got welcomed into a faith community that loved me. I remember encountering God’s love and it changed the way that I thought of myself as a misfit.

“It gave me passion and purpose, and I think in 2017, it was my big moment when it flicked a switch,

I pursued sport so hard until I was 20 that I thought that was what would make me happy – once I was an Olympian, once I reached something, then I’d be happy. I got to a level where I had everything I ever dreamed of, but I was still dissatisfied – I realised I had put my identity into performance and achievement. Faith for me was realising that I am loved regardless of performance – high jumping is simply a way to connect me to God.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

“That has just allowed me to soar over every high jump bar and not be scared anymore. Because I am loved. That is the most important thing.”[[4]](#endnote-4)

You have an everlasting crown. May no one take your crown.

Security, vindication, and the ultimate reward for patience and holding on to Christ.

We are all holding on at the moment. However high the bar is raised, may God strengthen us to hold on further.

**Prayer**

Loving God,
open our ears to your encouragement
and your challenge.
Give us the confidence we need
to go out through the doors you open
and share your story, and your love
beyond the confines of our buildings –
beyond the confines of our limited imaginations.
Amen

*The Rev’d Clare Downing, Moderator of Wessex Synod and General Assembly Moderator*

**Prayers of intercession**

This week, as we pray for other people, let us ask God to help us see them from his perspective, rather than making asumptions.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

Lord, we lift to you our world leaders. It is so easy to be critical of them, to believe what we read in the papers or on social media rather than seeing them as people just like us with needs like ours. In an increasingly unstable world we ask you to give them wisdom and integrity. Help them to put the needs of their country before their own desires. We pause for a moment of silence now, as we try to imagine what it must be like to walk in their shoes.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

We pray for countries at war or suffering long periods of unrest, particularly Afghanistan and the Middle East. It’s so easy for people to take sides and fight rather than try and see the world from the perspective of others. We pray that a new desire to love and treasure others may sweep this planet, bringing in a new reign of peace.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

In our country, Lord, we thank you for the example given to us by the Queen and continue to uphold her in prayer. We ask that you will give her comfort as she mourns the death of Prince Philip and as her grandchildren are the focus of so much public scrutiny. We pray for our government, as the problems of Covid-19 continue to beset us all. Help us not to be critical of the rules and regulations and the people who make them but, instead, to do our best to keep others safe.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

Lord, we pray for our communities and all who live and serve in them. We thank you for those who sweep our streets, empty our bins and clean our shops, workplaces and hospitals. We pray for your strength and reassurance for our over-stretched NHS and for tired teachers trying to have a summer break. We pray for the unemployed and those on zero hours contracts struggling to make ends meet. And, Lord, we pray for the ‘onlys’, the people overlooked by society or considered insignificant. We ask that we, as a church, may find ways to help the disadvantaged in our communities in the short-term whilst praying that our government may have the courage to find long-term solutions.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

We come before you, Lord, in sorrow that so many people in our world are abused or neglected because of their race, colour or gender. We ask your forgiveness for any part we have played in preventing your world from being a place of harmony and stability. We lift up the millions of refugees fleeing unsafe homes. We pray for the migrants trying to cross the channel and we pray too for those who exploit them. We ask you to give strength and courage to all those fighting for justice in our world. We ask you to give us all the eyes to see everyone as made in your image with equal worth.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

Finally, Lord, we commit to you those who live around us. We picture them in our minds now as we bring them to you for blessing:  our friends, our neighbours, the people who walk their dogs past our house, those we say ‘hi’ to in the street or at the station or on the bus but don’t know their names. We pray for those who live behind closed doors that we never see, those we used to spend time with who, for whatever reason, we don’t see anymore. And we pray for those whom we avoid... Lord, you know them all by name and we thank you for each of them and for the way they touch our lives. Give us the grace to be good neighbours, willing to go the extra mile for all these people who are, underneath it all, just the same as us.

All-seeing and everloving God,
**help us to see others as your children, cherished by you.**

Help us to serve one another
**because we are all made in your image.**

**Help us to bring your love to everyone we meet this week.
Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Thank you, Lord, for believing in us,
for seeing beyond our outside
and knowing who we really are inside.
Thank you for giving us all we need to do your work,
even when others may tell us we are ‘only’.
Thank you, Lord, for calling us to be adverts for you,
so that others can see that you also believe in them.
**Amen.**

1. *Jenny Cheung* [*https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/114-july-august-2021-b/proper-14/the-week-in-focus*](https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/114-july-august-2021-b/proper-14/the-week-in-focus) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://evangelicalfocus.com/life-tech/11273/high-jump-is-a-platform-to-make-jesus-known-says-new-australian-recordwoman> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/mar/20/i-do-sport-but-its-not-who-i-am-nicola-mcdermott-jumping-for-gold-and-god-in-tokyo> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.news.com.au/sport/olympics/what-aussie-high-jumper-nicola-mcdermott-was-writing-in-her-notebook/news-story/8f67f367239fd524b49ab949b4ee0116> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)