**5th September 2021**

Let us say to one another:
‘Be strong. Do not fear. God, our God, is here with us.’
Come with your fears, your doubts, your anxiety.
Come just as you are.
You are welcome in the name of God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.



**A gathering prayer**

Welcoming God, you invite us
to worship you and to be together.
Sustain us with your presence,
nourish us with your word,
strengthen us in your service
and send us out to live
every day of our lives, in your name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

All-inclusive and ever-loving God,
we praise and adore you.
With you there is no south or north,
no east or west – no borders.
You care for each one of us.
You are a healing God, who heals us
wherever and whenever we need your touch –
whether in body, mind or spirit.
We look upon you now,
our hearts ablaze with love for you.
**Amen.**



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

*Display some images of people of all ‘types’ (e.g. skin colour, size, abilities) and, in a short time of silence, invite those present to think about the people represented by the images, and also those they see regularly in their own daily lives.*

Forgive us, Lord, for all the times
we are too quick to form opinions,
too quick to judge others;
the times we don’t give people the benefit of the doubt;
or fail to consider what they might be going through.
Open our eyes to see and our ears to listen, as you do.
**Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

The Gentile woman and the deaf man
opened their minds and hearts to Jesus.
When we open our minds,
God helps us to understand his ways.
**We bless you, Lord.**
When we open our hearts, God sees deep within.
He loves us and wants us to turn to him,
even when we’ve done wrong.
**We bless you, Lord.**
God comes to us now and listens to us,
loves us, and forgives us.
He makes us whole.
**We bless you, Lord.**
**Amen.**



**Bible reading: Mark 7.24-37**

**Sermon**

This week, our headlines have been filled with stories of those fleeing Afghanistan and arriving in distant lands empty-handed and full of fears for those they have left behind. There have also been many stories of an open and inclusive welcome; children playing in church yards, collection stations for clothing, nappies, cots and other essentials. Despair has been met with openness and inclusiveness in many nations around the world, and in many communities across the UK people have been involved in providing this welcome.

 The UK has announced plans to accept 20,000 Afghan refugees over the long term. The British government's Afghan Citizens' Resettlement Scheme will aim to allow 5,000 Afghans to settle in the UK in the first year. Where they go is an interesting question with details emerging that few affluent areas are offering to take them in and mostly the deprived city areas are going to house them. The challenge will be to local communities as they settle to truly show that all are welcome here. But those thorny issues of integration or isolation will surface? Will Afghans be expected to learn about British values – such as democracy, women’s rights, the equality of the LGBT community? Is the welcome two way – with an expectation that they will fit – when in Rome…..

The late Rabbi Lord Jonathon Sachs compared the old multicultural model for integrating minorities to a hotel: ‘A hundred immigrants turn up in a town. The leaders of the town say ‘welcome. Please come and stay in one of our hotels. All you have to do is pay the bill and you’re free to do whatever you like in your room’. Everyone was free to keep their own identities.. the only trouble is that in a hotel no one belongs. A hotel is not a home… it was disastrous for any sense of collective identity: the home we build together.’

These are some of the deeper issues beyond just welcoming people. Integration or Isolation?

Some of our young people may have experienced this welcome themselves. All of them will find themselves in the place of meeting and gathering with others they have much in common with and  those who are quite different to them, as they return to school this week. In playgrounds and classrooms, communities are formed as young people from a wide range of backgrounds, stories and experiences find opportunities to be open and inclusive with one another.

Sadly though it isn’t always so positive. Sin rears its head in all ages. Bullying, exclusiveness, prejudice, discrimination all play out in the playground.

I remember starting secondary school. I had my new school uniform on, my brushed hair and perfectly knotted tie. It was as though I had a sign over my head – I’m a newbie!

You soon learnt that the school yard was territorial with certain years owning various corners. The top year patrolled what was called the pit. It was where the yard went down to the cellar of the school. It was dark and mysterious. Abandon hope all ye who entered here. The older boys would occasionally go on hunting raids to track down a weedy first year and put them through some initiation rites in the pit – which usually involved ritual humiliation and lots of pushing and kicking. Welcome to big school. I had two things in my favour. I was tall for my age and I had big feet. So when they came for me I was able to resist and kicked back. Bullies usually don’t like you fighting back so I was let go off.

The worrying thing is that psychologists say that most people don’t progress much beyond an emotional age of 12. Our Christian faith will tell us we are sinners, always flawed and susceptible to the darker side of our natures – power, privilege, pride, a desire to be right, a desire to think we are better than others, a desire to judge and separate, and a rebellion towards God our true authority, creator and sustainer of life. We will do it our way. Luther described sin as a heart curved in on itself. A heart not open to God, nor to the other.

Are there any places that, technically, you could go to but, for some reason, you don’t? And you don’t because you feel that you wouldn’t fit in. Could it be that posh restaurant and you don’t feel your etiquette is quite up to the mark? Or maybe it’s a pub or bar, and for no reason other than they are just not places you are used to going to? Or maybe it’s an age thing – there is a reason why, for example, some night clubs had, or certainly used to have, oldies nights, singles nights and so on – we do feel more comfortable ‘with our own’! Maybe it’s a church. If the tradition is very different, we might feel that we don't belong and won’t fit in! Some churches say we want younger people to join us – but the expectation is that they fit into the existing tradition and culture of the church and don’t change anything.

All societies, clubs, organizations may say they are inclusive – but once in you find they are exclusive: they all have their rules, standards values.

We can all probably think of somewhere. It is a common enough experience.

Mark’s story tells of two people who not only felt that they weren’t welcome – it was a lived reality. Neither of them was welcome in Israel because they were not Jewish. The women was a Gentile – a non-Jew. That was what defined her and made her not welcome. A Gentile and a woman – Jesus should not have spoken to her. But he did.

She had clearly heard of Jesus. She came to find him, to beg healing for her daughter. It may be a bit tricky for us to understand all the ins and outs of the – to us – strange conversation they had, but the result was Jesus spoke to her and her daughter was healed. Religious and cultural boundaries are no barrier to God’s kingdom.

And the man who was deaf was also not a Jew – he came from Decapolis. And Jesus speaks to him too, and he too is healed. And if we didn’t get it with the women and her daughter, Mark is explicit this time: this is fulfilment of the prophecy in Isaiah chapter 35 – a prophecy about how God’s kingdom will come to the whole world, not just the Jews.

When I was a community worker for a church in Nottingham that existed on some council estates, I remember one woman in the community who was a salt of the earth character, who was a local activist and all round generous soul to those on the estates. I remember her once asking profound questions about poverty and injustice and wondering if there was any meaning to life. I said why don’t you come to the church and explore what the Christian faith says about those questions. Oh its not for me she said. Im not good enough. I don’t wear nice clothes. I tried to reassure her that she didn’t need to be good, nor have nice clothes to come to church but she wouldn’t be convinced.

A chaplain was telling the women in a UK prison about the woman from Tyre. When they heard about Jesus speaking to the woman as though she was a dog stealing food from the Jewish people, they assumed Jesus was insulting her.

***27****‘First let the children eat all they want,’ he told her, ‘for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.’*

***28****‘Lord,’ she replied, ‘even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’*

But they warmed to the idea that Jesus might be testing her in a battle of words. They agreed that she stood up to Jesus and spoke well. In other healing stories, Jesus says that people’s faith had made them well. But here, Jesus compliments the woman for her words – and it is because of those words that she learns that God has healed her daughter.

*For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter.*

In today’s culture, where women are encouraged to speak for themselves, how is this story heard and what difference does it make?

She’s got what the disciples don’t seem to have grasped: that the boundary between God’s reign and everywhere else is porous and all sorts of people can come in and out, including this Greek woman. She did, of course, have faith. It was faith that sent her on the journey to seek Jesus out, and faith that kept her going on the journey back to see whether Jesus’ word was true and her daughter had been healed – that faith was not disappointed (v.30).

Hearing loss of course disadvantages someone. I know my grandma used to have selective deafness. She was oblivious to most of the conversation but if you said something about her she would pipe up: ‘I heard that’. Hearing impairment does make you feel excluded from the conversation. What might it be like to have Jesus say, ‘Be opened’ and suddenly hear’? (You may have seen videos of someone having a cochlea implant turned on for the first time. The Paralympics remind us of other disabilities that might challenge for fuller inclusion into our society.

Is it significant that Mark tells us the Aramaic – ephphatha – that Jesus speaks so that it stands out? Could it be referring not just to the man’s ears and mouth but also to the kingdom, now opened to Gentiles? All foods being declared clean expands into all people being declared clean. Jesus again tries to keep what he’s doing quiet. But word spreads like wildfire through the whole area. The Jewish leaders might not get it, but two Gentiles have joined him in his message: the boundaries are breaking down, everyone’s welcome to come and experience God’s reign.

Have we got hearts curved in on ourselves? Or hearts open to others and to God. To experience the welcome of God and share that with others.

Pray together for greater inclusion in your community:
Faithful God,
you invite everyone to be part of your kingdom.
Help us to share your story and your love
with a world that so often divides and excludes.
Show us how not to be part of the problem,
but to be generous in our welcome,
and courageous and inclusive in our love for all.
Help us to walk in the footsteps of Jesus.
**Amen.**

**Prayers of intercession**

God whose peace knows no borders,
as we watch the aftermath of the withdrawal of American troops in Afghanistan and see the chaos at Kabul airport and bewilderment on the faces of people left behind, we pray urgently for your peace to descend. We pray for those who are fearful, for people whose circumstances have suddenly and radically changed. Help them work out what to do and find the ways and means to do what is necessary to stay safe. We pray for those now in charge of the country. May our anxieties about the way they will rule move us to pray with passion for Afghanistan.

Lord bring peace,
**and may your love be known by all.**

God whose comfort knows no borders,
hurricane Ida has left a trail of destruction in Mississippi and with a rising death toll we pray for the communities that have been deeply affected by the storm. Give the emergency services resilience and patience as they work to rescue people and restore their vital services. For those families who have suffered loss, please bring them support and kindness as they come to terms with what has happened. As communities rebuild we pray they would have the resources to regroup, restore and recover from this natural disaster and be able to move forwards.

Lord bring comfort,
**and may your love be known by all.**

God whose compassion knows no borders,
with the new school term just getting going for some and looming for others we pray for everyone moving on this September. Whether changing year groups, schools or heading off to university for the first time help our young people as things change this autumn. We are particularly mindful of those for whom last year was very difficult – with covid, disruption to routines, difficult times with home learning and personal loss. May all of the children who have had a hard time know compassion and care and may this year be calm and ordered, filled with fun and purpose.

Lord bring compassion,
**and may your love be known by all.**

God whose care and concern knows no borders,
Covid still dominates all of our news cycles. It feels like there are very big differences across our world with some places heading out of restrictions and people feeling life is getting back to normal, and others still struggling with the disease and a lack of vaccinations. Please give world leaders the motivation and determination to help everyone manage covid. Help those who make complex decisions about vaccinations work out how to provide jabs for the poor as well as the rich. We pray for wisdom and calm as we approach the winter, for timely and sensible decisions and for the health and safety of our friends, family and neighbours.

Lord bring care and concern,
**and may your love be known by all.**

We bring to god those on our own hearts at this moment in just a moment of silence – we offer our own prayers for those whom we know and care for.

Lord bring your joy to this world,
**and may your love be known by all.**



**A sending out prayer**

God of salvation,
Teach us to be open to others,
to offer welcome, and practise inclusion.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**