**3rd October 2021**

**Call to worship**

Jesus calls us to come to him:
to come whoever we are,
to come wherever we are,
to come as we are.
So, let us come!
Come to Jesus, for all are invited.



**A prayer of adoration**

God the Father, we adore you.
Male and female,
each one made in your image,
yet every single one unique.

God the Son, we adore you.
You are with us every step of the way,
you are our going out and our coming in.

God the Spirit, we adore you.
You are in us and around us,
we are never alone with you in our lives.
**Amen.**



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

Lord God, sometimes we find it so hard to come to you,
to confess our sins to you.
Sometimes our relationships – with you and with each other – aren’t right.
It can be all too easy to let other people, or things, keep us away from you.
And sometimes we try and keep others away. Please forgive us,
Lord, and teach us what truly matters to you.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

God takes us in his arms and blesses us.
God loves us and protects us.
When we come to God in a true spirit of repentance,
from the littlest ‘sorry’ of the youngest child,
to the biggest ‘Father forgive’ of those old enough
to know better,
God hears us and welcomes us with open and loving arms.
We are blessed.
**Amen.**

**Mark 10.2-16**

The latest James Bond film, No Time to Die, had its world premiere this week. The Guardian review said ‘The standard bearer of British soft power is back, in a film yanked from cinemas back in the time of the toilet roll shortage, based on a literary character conceived when sugar and meat rationing was still in force, and now released as Britons are fighting for petrol on the forecourts.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is apparently about a man-made virus that seeks to overrun the globe. Talk about pertinent.

Much comment has been made about how the new Bond film has been praised for its strong female characters, that women are not passive objects for Bond to bed and then leave as in some previous films.[[2]](#endnote-2) There has been protest that this is part of a ‘woke’ agenda and is ‘political correctness gone mad’.

As a child I remember pretending I was Roger Moore as he played The Saint: Simon Templar. You see another Simon. I was thrilled when Roger Moore became James Bond in the early 1970s. But watching those Bond films now you cringe at the sexism and misogyny: the tapping girls on their bottoms and excluding them from ‘Men’s talk’ and other patronizing behaviours. Sean Connery was even worse, with this film’s director describing the depiction of Bond in the 1960s as basically a rapist. Now there is speculation as to whether the next Bond will be a female or a black actor. In many ways the Bond films are a capsule of how culture changes and attitudes towards gender and sexuality changes.

The questioning of Gender seems to be a real hot topic at the moment with various ideologies competing with each other and our young people in particular caught up in the crossfire. We must pray for wisdom and sensitivity for teachers, parents and the young people working through all these issues in those formative years when personalities are being shaped.

This week saw one Labour MP Rose Duffield refusing to attend the Labour Conference having received threats and being branded transphobic for saying only women have a cervix. Keir Starmer said she shouldn’t have said it. Sajid Javid accused him of a total denial of scientific fact.

I also read this week a publication by the Church of Scotland entitled Diverse Gender Identities and Pastoral Care which has a number of testimonies from all angles of this ongoing cultural discussion of gender. Some who suffer from what is called gender dysphoria: the distress a person feels due to a mismatch between their gender identity—their personal sense of their own gender—and their sex assigned at birth. There are testimonies of parents who go through the grief of losing a daughter who changes gender to being a trans man; a spouse who finds the person they married isn’t who they originally believed they were and a church minister as he tries to care for all in congregation as someone comes out as trans. It is a sensitive and thoughtful document that speaks into the confusion and pain at large within society.

If all this is deeply confusing to you you’re not alone. For most people it is well beyond their comfort zone, (see this article for a brief introduction: <https://www.premierchristianity.com/features/baffled-by-non-binary-heres-a-biblical-and-pastoral-response-to-trans-issues/5416.article> )

In our Bible passage set for today we on the face of it have Jesus reaffirming the traditional view of gender identities and of marriage being between a man and a woman.

I got this passage thrown at me by a member of the public recently objecting to the Quarry Chapel decision to register for same sex marriage.

What can we say about it? Inevitably people will make it say what they want it to say.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus frequently appears to be in conflict with various groups and individuals. Often it is people, who – like the Pharisees in this passage – have a clear idea of what God is like and what God wants from people. The problem is that, because they think they know the answer, they stop listening to God. In this case the issue is whether divorce is ‘lawful’ (v.2).

At that time, the belief was that the relationship between God and his creation was fixed by the Law, as given by God through Moses at Sinai. Over time this had been explained and discussed, interpreted and re-interpreted. Yet, Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question is not what they anticipated. Instead of interpreting (or re-interpreting) the Law, Jesus goes back to creation: what did God want for men and women?[[3]](#endnote-3)

Picking up on the James Bond issue of sexism it’s worth looking at our cultural diet through the lens of the creation account in Genesis. Woman is not a separate creature to be named and controlled by man, but is created out of – of the very same flesh as – the man himself. Taken alongside the other creation account we see that both men and women have been made in God’s image and given equal value. We should be aware when the media we consume does not reflect this essential truth.

The passages explore the relationship between God/Jesus and different groups of people. In Genesis, God cares that humans, alone, are incomplete – hence the creation of animals and a companion. The picture of God creating and man naming the animals suggests harmonious relationships. With the arrival of woman, this relationship develops and changes – just as everyone’s relationship with their parents moves on as they mature. The man and woman become one flesh. And there are many interpretations of what ‘one flesh’ means’.

If we agree that some people in our society are gay then, I would argue, out of pastoral necessity, because its not good to be alone, that same sex marriage allows that blessing of permanent faithful exclusive relationship that God gives to build some people up. Not all will want to be in relationship -its complex isn’t it.

Put this week’s Gospel reading in context of its time and it underlines the importance of the man/woman relationship at a time when separation (divorce) could be engineered almost at will, and for trivial reasons. Most scholars interpret the intention of Jesus in this teaching is to protect the vulnerable -as women had few rights in those days. If they were divorced they were soiled goods and had little chance of getting remarried and would be cast on the mercy of a village or resort to prostitution in order to earn a living. It was desperate.

Jesus intention is also to protect families, as again because of the cultural make up they were vital for the wellbeing of society. Arguably some things have changed now, and people have greater freedom and independence and the concerns over abuse and unhappiness and emotional as well as physical harm in relationships would, I would argue, lead Jesus to support the protection of the vulnerable and that may mean splitting or divorce as the last course of action. But there is still the concern for the family and what supports family life and not harms it.

Relationships are explored again when children are brought to Jesus. He emphasizes the value of women and children in a society where they were often marginalized and ignored, sometimes even abused. He tells us that absolutely everyone is important to God.

The second part (vv.13ff) continues within the domestic context but is about children. Modern understanding of childhood emerged properly only in the 19th century. Traditionally (and it is still true in many places) children, once old enough, worked within the family business. At the same time, because they were children, they had no power, no rights. They were the property of their parents. Children were not important in the power structures.

Against this background, Jesus uses children to speak about God. This is radical. Usually God was spoken about in terms of power, might and compassion. In the story, the disciples are vetting Jesus’ contacts, and children are unimportant. But Jesus welcomes and receives them. This is not sentimental. It is a statement that no one is unimportant to God. It is also a prick in the pomposity of a society that grades and stratifies. Instead, Jesus challenges those around him not to be self-reliant, or falsely confident about who they are (vv.15-16). Rather, he invites everyone to come to him and to be touched by God.

In the last few verses of the Gospel passage, Jesus welcomes children who are brought to him despite the disciples’ attempts to keep them away. He uses what happened to talk about the kingdom of God belonging to ‘such as these’. Does he mean here that it belongs to children, or people whose attitudes are like those of children? And, if the latter, what might those characteristics be? Can we see childlike qualities that might be good for coming together with God and others? Can we see any qualities that might be problematic? Children may be a blessing, but again children can be difficult. Is the suggestion that our values and inner attitudes are more important than those often regarded as important by society, e.g. age, education, social status? Or is it that, in mentioning first women and then children, Jesus is drawing attention to those so often marginalised in society? Or is it both? And what can we do about it?

Let the little children come. The writer of my worship notes tells a story of welcoming children.

Our church had a toddler group with a 3-year-old ringleader, Bradley. Every Tuesday he would arrive five minutes after we’d started, by banging open the doors and shouting ‘Yeah’ – to which the entire group would respond ‘It’s Bradley’ and the fun would start.

After a year, his mum was persuaded that Jesus was worth getting to know and that she should come to church on a Sunday. They arrived, five minutes after the service started, with Bradley running ahead of his Mum to bang open the doors and yell as he had done every week. The look on this little boy’s face as he yelled at forty-five people sat in rows, who all looked round *en masse*, in place of his usual playmates was one of shock and horror.

His mother was mortified, snatched him up and sat right at the back trying not to notice everyone now looking at them. No-one tutted or complained or criticised the mother at all, but her own sense of being out of place and unwelcome meant that she interpreted simple looks directed at an interruption as personal criticism.

The disciples were deliberately stopping the children from coming to Jesus, but I still wonder if, by not getting out of my seat and loudly welcoming this mother and child, I kept them from knowing Jesus. Often, people expect that they are unwelcome and will read this into the body language of the people that they see. As Christians, we need to follow Jesus’ example and overtly welcome people as he did those children.

So I think the principles of this passage are about concern for those who are vulnerable and also ensuring a non-judgmental welcome to all.

In a fractious world of culture wars and gender confusion can we keep those principles in place whatever position we take?

How do you react in conflict? Can you retain your sense of humour or do little things suddenly seem much worse? The petrol forecourts have seen people laughing, sharing stories of why they have to queue for petrol or cheering as others fill up their tanks. They have also seen abuse directed at petrol station staff, police and fellow motorists with fistfights breaking out on occasion.

We are created for relationship, for community but we can allow our own needs and concerns to overrule that and bring us into conflict. As Christians we are secure in the knowledge that we are created by God and provided for by God. Keeping that in mind helps us to respond with kindness and laughter rather than stress and shouting.

Our culture is wrestling with deep questions of identity that create missional moments: *Which you is you? Who are we? How do you live the good life? Why are we here?* These are fundamental questions about meaning, significance, connection and our place in the world. It’s complicated, but they offer incredible opportunities to unpack the good, true and beautiful story of God. The Reading Group I’m starting up in a couple of weeks time tries to address some of those questions about identity using the book ‘*Why Being yourself is a bad idea’*.

May God help us to respond to all with compassion and kindness and pastoral sensitivity. We do all things in the love of Christ.

And we gather round his table to know that accepting love. This is an act of communion – one together in Christ, our primary identity. Whether we are men or women, gay or straight, or all the shades of sexuality and gender in between; whether we voted for Brexit or were Remainers, card carrying Labour voters or Tories through and through; whether we have petrol in the tank or not; whether we are crazy enough to support Burnley at football or prefer to support a team that wins things like the Manchester clubs, all that is secondary to our identity and calling in Christ. Let us share in the feast.

**Prayers of intercession**

Loving God we bring into your tender care all families in which there is discord. We pray for those who live with tension and distrust, with faithlessness and abuse. Bring healing to broken relationships and reconciliation to those who feel hurt. Help us all to accept the variety of family models which make up our world and not to judge one another.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God we pray for those who grieve a loved one especially those who have been killed. We remember the family of Sabina Nessa and Sarah Everard all those whose loved ones have been victims of street violence. We pray that all people will respect one another and that everyone may be able to walk the streets in safety.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God we thank you for the family of nations. Today we pray for the people of Germany for those negotiating to form a new government. May they rule in justice and compassion. We pray for the leaders of Afghanistan that they will respect the human rights of their citizens and foster tolerance and peace.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God we pray for the victims of the earthquake in Crete, for the family of the man who died, for those who were injured and for all whose lives and well-being have been affected. May your love give peace to those who are suffering and give vision and determination to those who seek to rebuild homes and communities.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God we bring to you the crisis concerning gas prices and its impact on our communities. We pray for those who are concerned that increased gas prices will reduce them to food poverty. Guide the companies and the government that a fair and equitable conclusion may be reached. Comfort and strengthen those who are worried about their future.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God we pray for all who are sick. We continue to pray for those who are suffering as a result of Covid-19 for their families and for all health professionals. We pray that the vaccination programme may be successful in minimising the number of people who catch the virus.

God of all families,
**bring wholeness and peace.**

Loving God, unite us as your family: may the stronger offer support, the wealthier share what they have, the church offer hope and all your children live together in peace.
God of all, in your name we pray.Amen

**A sending out prayer**

Loving Lord, as we leave this place,
knowing that we are valued and loved,
help us to know this so deep in our being
that we live it in our words and actions,
and especially in our openness and welcome to others.
May Jesus’ invitation shine through our lives.
**Amen.**

1. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/sep/29/no-time-to-die-review-daniel-craig-dispatches-james-bond-with-panache-rage-and-cuddles [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/115-september-october-2021-b/proper-22/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/115-september-october-2021-b/proper-22/bible-notes [↑](#endnote-ref-3)