**17th October 2021**

**Call to worship**

Let us come together to be still,  
to be known, loved, and held by God our creator,  
to be thankful for all that God gives us,  
to be healed and restored,  
that in our worship today  
joy and gladness may refresh and renew us



[**A gathering prayer**](javascript:void(0))

God our creator, we are made in your image,  
create and reshape us anew for your purposes.  
God our sustainer, who sent your Son Jesus to be our servant,  
by your grace, forgive us where we have hurt your world.  
God our guide and inspiration,  
open our hearts to receive your wisdom,  
inspire and direct us –

[**A prayer of adoration**](javascript:void(0))

God of community,  
you look down from heaven  
on your children on earth,  
and are overcome with love.  
Love that reaches out  
to touch even the most faraway soul.

God the Father, who made all creation,  
and shares all good gifts with us.  
**We adore you.**

God the Son,  
just as you walked on earth with your friends,  
you are always here with us.  
**We adore you.**

God the Spirit,  
though we don’t see you,  
we know you are deep within our hearts.  
You make sense of our place in your world.  
**We adore you. Amen.**



[**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**](javascript:void(0))

Lord, sometimes we have very set ideas about communities.  
The ones we belong to. The ones we aspire to. The ones we stay away from. Help us to see as you do: you love every member of every community. We are all one in you. Forgive us when we look down on others, or consider our way alone to be the right one. Help us to work together with you for good, putting ourselves aside and others always first. **Amen.**

God sees our hearts as we turn to him to seek forgiveness.  
He doesn’t want us to fight for preference but to grow ever closer to him through pure and simple love.  
As we come to him,  
acknowledging that we don’t always get it right, he freely and abundantly pardons us.  
Thank you, most gracious God. **Amen.**

**Mark 10. 35-45**

Every parent wants the best for their children. We want them to succeed and get on in life. But how?

James and john two of Jesus disciples come to Jesus and ask him to do whatever they ask.

They were nakedly ambitious and proud: they wanted, and believed they deserved, places of honour in Jesus' kingdom. They were ignorant and insensitive: their request for places of honor came right after Jesus had told of His coming suffering and death.

James and John want all the glory of being in God’s kingdom: of sitting next to Jesus in heaven and going down in history. But they have no idea what that really means. To share Christ’s glory, they must also share his suffering. They want the highest honour? They’re going to have to pay the highest price.

Are you embracing everything it means to be a Christian? Are there aspects of being in God’s community that you shy away from?

The request seems to reflect the internal squabbles and jostling for power among Jesus’ inner group of disciples. In the parallel account in Matthew (Matthew 20.20-28). Matthew’s alteration to what most scholars consider the earlier version in Mark is both amusing and infuriating! For in Matthew’s account, it is now the mother of James and John rather than the two brothers themselves who ask for the privileged seats in Jesus’ kingdom.

The theory goes that the increasing respect paid to the ‘holy apostles’ as the first Christian century ran its course meant that it became unthinkable that a couple of them might have personally made such a crass request…so ‘Blame it on mum!’ Typical! It’s all your parents fault!

Clare Amos [[1]](#endnote-1)wrote a short reflection on that, which began humorously, but ended up – deadly seriously – by pointing out that Jesus’ words about the ‘cup’ in response to the request lead us eventually to Gethsemane, where James and John also figure and where Jesus prays ‘Remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want’ (Mark 14.16):

**Blame it all on Mum – *linked to Matthew 20.20-28***That’s right – blame it all on Mum! Mothers have a lot to answer for  
(Or at least their children tell them so).  
James and John must have been quite a handful:  
‘Sons of thunder’ no less, but she loved them still.  
She didn’t know what she was asking –  
Else she would have sealed her lips tight shut.  
For top places in an upside-down kingdom,  
Require us to sit at the bottom of the table,  
Waiting til everyone else has been fed.  
Ah well, at least they can still drink from the cup –  
Yes, that one which Jesus himself quaffed,  
One night when they waited with him in dark Gethsemane  
And found it difficult to stay awake.

It is no accident that this episode of squabbling among the disciples is both prefaced and concluded by a reference to the ‘Son of Man’ (Mark 10.33,45). This third person description on Jesus’ own lips has a corporate dimension to it. That was widely accepted by previous generations of biblical scholars. Even though the idea is less popular today, it seems to me that the clear link between the phrase and the Hebrew idiom for a ‘human being’ (see, for example, older translations of Psalm 8.4) means that this aspect should not be ignored.

In referring to himself as ‘Son of Man’ in this way Jesus was inviting his disciples – and eventually his later followers throughout Christian history – to become part of a new humanity in which service rather than privilege was paramount, and in which a deep sense of ‘we are all in this together’ replaces the aspiration to find someone else to be the scapegoat and a convenient target for our blame.

Blame game is of course what our society is good at. Whether its how the nation responded to the pandemic or whether its gas prices or threatened shortages for Christmas, or you can’t see your GP – blame A N Other or blame it on Covid!

One of the results of the increasing awareness of the climate crisis is, I believe, a gradually dawning awareness that ‘we ARE all in this together’ and that playing ‘the blame game’ is both fruitless and ultimately counterproductive. ‘Together’ we need to work for solutions that will benefit us all, as well as the fragile globe on which we live. At least I hope so!

John F Kennedy famously said at his inauguration as US Pr4esdient in 1961, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country?’

We are such a consumerist society that we are constantly looking for a quality of service. We pay to be entertained. We pay to have a certain standard of living. We feel entitled. We assert our rights. Its all about what we can get out of life. We have that subtle attitude when we come to church. What do we get out of it? Rather than what do we give to it?

A simple test of character is the question: "Why?" Why does the candidate seek the power a position holds? Why does the actor seek fame in Hollywood or on Broadway? Why does the business person seek wealth or the climb up the corporate ladder? Why does the person of faith seek a position of ministry?

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with ambition in any of these fields. In fact, most people use ambition to better themselves and their surroundings.

But the question must be asked: why do people seek positions of leadership? Do they want wealth and fame and power for themselves alone? Or do they want to use these ambitions for the greater good?

In 1878, when the Salvation Army was really beginning to make its mark, men and women from all over the world began to enlist. A man who had once dreamed of becoming a bishop in another denomination crossed the Atlantic from America to England to enlist in the Salvation Army instead. His name was Samuel Brengle. Brengle left a fine pastorate to join William Booth's Army. At first General Booth accepted his services reluctantly and grudgingly. Booth said to Brengle, "You've been your own boss too long." So in order to instill humility in Brengle, he made him work by cleaning the boots of other trainees.  
  
Discouraged, Brengle said to himself, "Have I followed my own fancy across the Atlantic in order to black boots?" Then, as in a vision, he saw Jesus bending over the feet of rough, uneducated fishermen. "Lord," he whispered, "you washed their feet; I will black their shoes."  
  
Samuel Brengle went on to establish the Salvation Army in America. At the time of his death, the Salvation Army was thriving in both the United States and in Canada. Just before his death Brengle sent out a short memo to all of his top leaders. This memo had one single word written on it: "Others."

There is a clear paradox in being both a servant and a leader. Yet this is what the church seeks to be as it follows Christ, serving the needs of people and taking a lead in showing the direction towards wholeness and forgiveness.

Leadership is fundamentally about showing the way. The test is simple – does anyone follow? The exercise of power and authority through co-ercion through money and rewards can ensure that others will follow though not necessarily through persuasion and example. Then the question we have to ask to test the nature of leadership is: do those who follow grow as people or are they diminished by their experience of following?

These were the questions Jesus asked his followers when the subject of ambition raised its head among the Apostles.

There are many negative things that can be said about James and John or their mother. But there's one positive thing you can say about James and John: they believed in Jesus. Here was a poor, homeless, persecuted carpenter and yet James and John believed Jesus was a king. They believed that He would conquer the power structure of Rome."  Even their crude ambition reflected their faith in Christ.

Until Christ has captured our hearts, until Christ has redeemed us, our values and style of leadership and service, the types of followers we are, the ministry we give, the type of parents and examples we offer to our children - is likely to be of this world and not of the kingdom of God.

[**Prayers of intercession**](javascript:void(0))

When we seek power and glory for ourselves  
and overlook the needs of the humble and weak,  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

Where there are those who rely on food banks and on benefits,  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

Where stronger nations ignore the plight of the poor;  
where food and medical supplies are stockpiled while others cry out in need.  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

Where churches focus on their own desires  
and fail to see the needy at their gates.  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

When our neighbours are sick, imprisoned by addiction,  
cold through lack of shelter, lonely through isolation  
or tearful because of bereavement,  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

When our personal ease and comfort leads us  
to ignore the threats to the future of our planet,  
Christ, the servant king:  
**Help us to follow your example of service**

Loving God,  
we pray that our society may become characterised  
by our desire to serve one another;  
to help the weak and seek the common good.  
Help each one of us to work out our place  
in the community of those who follow Jesus.

In the name of Jesus we pray.  
**Amen.**



[**A sending out prayer**](javascript:void(0))

Lord, take our thoughts (*touch head*)  
and turn them into prayer. (*hands together*)  
Take our prayer and turn it into love. (*hands over heart*)  
Take our love and turn it into life.  
In Jesus Christ (*right index finger touches left wrist; then left index finger touches right wrist*)  
today and every day. (*palms face up in offering*)  
**Amen.**

1. *After retiring from her work as the coordinator of the office of*[*Interreligious Dialogue and Cooperation*](https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/interreligious-dialogue-and-cooperation)*at the World Council of Churches in early 2018, Dr Clare Amos now finds herself surprised (but not unhappy) to have been invited by the WCC to help with the induction of a newly appointed colleague in the department in the coming months and to prepare for the*[*WCC’s forthcoming Assembly*](https://www.oikoumene.org/about-the-wcc/organizational-structure/assembly) <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/115-september-october-2021-b/proper-24/the-week-in-focus> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)