**21st November 2021**

**Call to worship**

We come today to acknowledge Christ as King.
His throne is a cross, and he reigns from high heaven.
Beauty and holiness are the marks of his kingdom.
He is the face of God revealed in human form.
Let us keep our eyes fixed on him:
King Jesus – the Way, the Truth and the Life.



**A gathering prayer**

God of gods and King of kings,
be with us as we seek to know more of your truth.
Speak to us by your Word and your Spirit.
Help us to see Jesus, and to hear his voice –
not just for today, but for all days,
and for the glory of your kingdom.
In Jesus’ name we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

King of kings and Lord of lords, you are our God.
Before time began you were.
Your voice, Lord God, is louder than the roars of the oceans.
You are more powerful than the crashing waves of the sea.
You are forever and forever and forever.
You were. You are. You will be.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

God of mystery and magnificence, we see you as our king.
We read of visions of your throne, flaming and ethereal.
You are beyond our imagining,
beyond our dreams and visions and wildest hopes.
You are in us and with us and among us.
You are all we could imagine and wish for and more.
You are our God, our king of all creation.
**Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

O Lord our mighty God,
we have heard but not always listened to you:
with sorrow and sadness, we confess our sin.
We have seen need and closed our eyes to it:
with sorrow and sadness, we confess our sin.
We have closed our ears to cries for help:
with sorrow and sadness, we confess our sin.
We have known your truth and yet followed lies and falsehoods:
with sorrow and sadness, we confess our sin.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

The Lord God says:
be assured your sins are forgiven,
your slate is wiped clean.
Listen to the word of God and know its truth.
**Amen.**



**John 18.33-37**

There used to be a poster with a stern judge leaning over the dock pointing his finger with the caption ‘if you were on trial for being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?’

The Bible reading today has Jesu on trial before Pilate and Pilate asking questions about what is the truth? Jesus claims that everyone on the side of truth listens to him.

This Sunday is known as Christ the King Sunday when the church acclaims that Jesus is Lord of all the universe, the eon whom one day every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess. Is Jesus king of our lives?

Last Sunday at exactly this hour 32-year-old Emad Al Swealmeen detonated a homemade bomb inside a taxi in Liverpool killing himself and injuring the driver. He had converted to Christianity from Islam in 2017. He had been looked after for several months by a Christian couple who volunteered at Liverpool Cathedral where he attended an Alpha course.

Lt.Col Malcolm Hitchcott, who with his wife Elizabeth had taken Al Swealmeen to live with them, What an act of Christian love and sacrifice. Many would call it naive and reckless. But if Jesus is King, he has this effect on you: you love in his way: love the unlovable, love even your enemies. They may be despised as asylum seekers or refugees – but to God they are still valued and precious children.

Lt Col Hitchcott and wife said Al Swealmeen had first come to Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral in 2015 and wanted to convert from Islam to Christianity. They would pray with him daily and he would join in Bible study with them on a regular basis.

Associates claim they believed Al Swealmeen was only interested in converting to Christianity because he believed it would assist his asylum claim. He had made a new application in 2017 which was rejected. The Hitchcotts lost touch with him after 2017 and were shocked to hear of his actions last Sunday.

Speaking to the BBC, Mrs Hitchcott said: "We're just so, so sad. We just loved him, he was a lovely guy."

Was his conversion genuine? Was it just a scam to get asylum? Did he lapse in his faith and come under bad influences?

The parable of the Sower [[1]](#endnote-1)reminds us that even in the time of Jesus the gospel has no effect on some people, the devil snatches it away; on some the seed falls on rocky ground, they initially receive the word with joy but because they have no root they last only a short time and when troubles come they fall away; some seed falls on the thorn bushes and the gospel gets choked up with the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of wealth; but some falls on good soil and bears fruit.

My daughter as part of her law degree did a summer placement with a law firm defending asylum claimers and she sat in on an Iranian being questioned about his claim to be a Christian. He was a teacher in Iran who had come to faith in Christ and spoken about his faith but had to flee the country because of persecution – losing a well-paid job. He had gotten to Britain and got involved in a church having been disowned by his family. Jo said the interview was difficult because the translator the Home Office sent in wasn’t familiar with Christian terms, such as communion, salvation, redemption and so she felt there were some flaws in the system. She was aware though that some do try to use either the claim of Christianity or being gay as reasons to avoid being sent back to an intolerant country.

Whilst the Church of England says it has no evidence to suggest asylum seekers are converting to Christianity in order to launch appeals to stay in the country[[2]](#endnote-2) , what we know of human nature would suggest that some people will try any desperate measure to try and gain asylum. But genuine conversions are taking place.

An article in Christianity Magazine came from a book of testimonies of former Muslims who had found faith in Jesus. It claims that a record number of Muslims are converting to Christianity across the Middle East. Jamila tells her story of meeting Jesus while paralyzed in a Syrian hospital[[3]](#endnote-3)

She writes:

My fate was clear. It was too late for any reprieve. I was set to die, and there was nothing I could do about it. Even if I could have moved, it was no use.

I would shortly depart this world from Deir ez-Zor, Syria, like so many others during our miserable war, but it wasn’t the Islamic State that pronounced my death sentence. It was Dr Basil Hussein, one of the most respected neurologists in Syria. He explained to my family the end that he believed was inevitable due to a massive stroke.

I couldn’t talk, I couldn’t move. Alone in my mind, I cried at my hopeless, helpless situation. The isolation crushed me. But then, suddenly, I was not alone. The room erupted in dazzling light, and a man stood at the foot of my bed. He smiled and called my name: “Jamila, I am Jesus! I hear you’ve been looking for me.”

In my most extreme dreams, I could not have imagined this, but Jesus stood in my room! Even though I was a practising Muslim, I knew who he was. The Koran speaks of Jesus. And I’d also heard that he had been appearing miraculously to people during the Syrian war. In fact, I remembered thinking one day previously, when life was beyond hard, that I wished Jesus would visit me. There was so much hate all around. But Jesus was about love – so I had heard. And did we ever need some of that in Syria!

Evidently, he knew I had wished for his presence because he said to me: “Jamila, I know your longing for me to visit you. I’ve heard your cries. Here I am! I’ve come to heal you for my glory.”

I wondered if this was really happening, if it was a hallucination brought on by my medications or maybe it was just a crazy dream. Then Jesus touched my hand – my paralysed hand – and heat instantly diffused through my whole body.

I heard my mother shout: “Dr Basil! Jamila’s hand just moved! Did you see it?” I could hear her jump out of the chair next to my bed. Dr Basil stepped next to the bed and hovered above me with my family, looking for signs of movement. He was sceptical. “I didn’t see her move. Are you sure, Mrs Darwish?”

I could hear nurses checking monitors. Dr Basil was telling family members that my vitals did not show anything indicating improvement, when I suddenly felt like reaching out to Jesus. My right hand lifted in worship and Jesus, still at the foot of my bed, smiled lovingly at me.

I heard screams in the room and a thud on the floor as my mother passed out cold. Dr Basil yelled through the chaos: “Is she trying to grab someone’s hand?” I actually was! I desperately wanted to touch Jesus – like the woman with the issue of blood who touched the hem of his garment.

I know Jesus could have healed me instantaneously. He has the power to do that. But it’s possible that my family might have thought I just snapped out of the coma and that Dr Basil had simply been wrong in his diagnosis. So, over the next few days, Jesus healed me progressively. Each time, he touched a different part of my body.

After my hand, my right leg was next. He came in a vision the next morning and with just one finger, touched my knee. The paralysis left instantly. The next day, I gained a full range of motion in my neck and shoulders. My face muscles began to work, except that my eyes would not open and I still could not speak. But then, another day later, my eyes and mouth opened while my whole family watched. I looked straight up, my eyes staring towards the ceiling, as Jesus faded from the room.

The first words I heard my father say were: “Allahu Akbar! Allahu Akbar!” (Arabic for “God is great! God is great!”) But my first words were: “Jesus, Jesus, don’t leave me! I love you.” That certainly quieted the room! My shocked family could not comprehend the words that hung in the air.

Then: Boom! A massive explosion in the street interrupted the stunned silence. In Deir ez-Zor, peace is short lived. Even after a great miracle like I experienced, the brutal reality of war set in.

After Jesus healed me, the war worsened and my family fled Syria. We could either have gone north to Turkey or south to Jordan, but the border in northern Syria was nearly impassable because of Turkey’s battle against the Kurds. So, we headed south, to Jordan.

I wanted to find Jesus – somehow. Where could I go, I wondered, to find out more about the man who had healed me? Obviously, I couldn’t talk openly to anyone with my family present. Although they often discussed the healing in my life, they gave credit to Allah, not to Jesus. Yet I knew the truth.

Then one day in the outdoor market, I saw a woman wearing a cross necklace. In Deir ez-Zor, you could get killed for doing that, but I guessed Jordan must be little more lax. I followed her, working up the courage to ask a question. When she stopped at a vegetable stand, I saw my chance as she was picking out cucumbers.

“Jesus healed me of paralysis when I was in a coma.” I blurted out the words and could see that I startled the woman. *Who is this mysterious person in a burqa talking about Jesus?* she must have wondered. “Do you know how I can find out more information about Jesus? I’m Muslim, so I think I have a lot to learn. And, hello, my name is Jamila. What’s yours?” The woman just looked at me for a moment, then introduced herself as Maria.

Jesus certainly led me to the right person! Despite my abrupt, awkward self-introduction, Maria was warm and gracious. Over tea during the next couple of weeks, we became good friends. I asked her every question I could think of about Jesus. Although I was already convinced that Jesus had all power and was the saviour of the world, I had to know what it would be like to become a believer while in a radical Muslim family.

When Maria told me that I was the one sent by God to reach my family, I was ready. I gave my life to Jesus; it is a day I will never forget! The glorious thing is that Maria was right! Over time, every single person in my family – including my father – came to faith in Christ. What a miracle! It’s rare that a whole family who practises fundamentalist Islam become believers. So, I am privileged and blessed beyond anything I could have imagined. Jesus used the miracle of my healing to open the hearts of my family.

Still, it wasn’t easy. The process took a long time and we faced spiritual warfare all the way. But my mother, father and siblings are now in the family of God. We’re a Muslim family from Deir ez-Zor that loves Jesus!

My healing was the key. Everyone saw the miracle, and how could they deny the transformation in my life? I used to be negative and caustic but today, I’m filled with the love of God.

I witnessed for myself on a Sabbatical visit to the Palestinian West Bank how a Muslim couple unable to give birth had prayed in a Coptic church and had then conceived and consequently came to faith in Christ, although they had to keep that a secret for fear of being disowned by their community.

Graham Tomlin in his book Why Being Yourself is a Bad Idea, shares how as Bishop of Kensington in the middle of multicultural London, and having experienced the Grenfell Tower disasters, notes that there are no healing stories associated with Muhammed, after a desire not to overshadow the primary miracle for Muslims of Islam itself and the giving of the Koran. Buddha neither performed any miracles. But read the gospels and they are full of Jesus battling all that diminishes and destroys human life, sickness, injustice, death, as part of his victory and establishment of his reign as King overall.

When we look at Christianity in this country we are at a low morale. Our churches are emptying. Our young show no interest. The future looks bleak for the survival of the Christian faith in this land. The pandemic has arguably pushed us further into individualism and consumerism, two impulses that don’t sit well with faith.

Jeff Lucas wrote about his first time in America. We were savouring the experience of eating breakfast out at what was unappetisingly tagged as a ‘greasy spoon’ diner. Our server was a wildly enthusiastic soul, apparently thrilled to be helping us with the first meal of the day. But the ordering process soon became perplexing.[[4]](#endnote-4)

“And what can I get for you fine folks?” he twilled, all teeth and smiles.

“I’d like eggs and bacon please,” I replied, eager to keep things simple, which they were not.

“Awesome, sir!” he chirruped. “And sir, how would you like those eggs?”

Bewilderment immediately set in. “Err…on a plate?” I ventured.

“Ha ha! Awesome, sir! Very witty. No, you can have your eggs scrambled, boiled or fried – over easy, sunny side up or over hard.”

Baffled by this unfamiliar glossary of terms, I went for what sounded most familiar.

“Scrambled, please.”

“Awesome! What about toast? We have sourdough, wholegrain, wheat, white, rye or English muffin?”

As a consumer, I was being given the opportunity to have things exactly the way I wanted them.

Perhaps that’s just fine. But when an attitude of consumerism enters the Church, we’re headed for trouble. We all have our preferences and style choices about how church should be.

Surely the cursed Covid plague has accentuated our sense of individualism and consumerism. It’s been wonderful to see churches large and small adapt, offering online services of varying quality (my personal favourite is of the lone vicar who accidentally set himself alight while pontificating next to a candle). But now, we no longer need to experience Sunday morning pre-church tension: gathering the family, calming conflict over cornflakes, finding a parking space, dodging the usher with halitosis…

Courtesy of the internet, we can jump on and offline as we like. Don’t enjoy that hymn? Simple, fast-forward through it. Is the sermon somewhat snore-inducing? Log off. Watch when you want, what you want, in the comfort of your pyjamas. Once Covid has been tamed, virulent consumerism may well linger.

So, as we begin to gather again, let’s do so as congregants and family, not picky customers who demand that things are always done to our liking. When it comes to church, there really is only one King.

Is Jesus king? It’s not a popularity contest. British folk may not be interested, may not see any relevance in our faith. It doesn’t mean Christ is not King. Inevitably we will be affected by people’s indifference and rejection, but stand firm, let nothing move you. Jesus is King. May that truth shape your life and love.

**Prayers of intercession**

King of love,
you came among us not as a mighty ruler but as a child.
We pray for the children in our midst
that we would cherish them, listen to them and protect them,
and that we would bring their concerns to the heart of our worship.
We remember all who lead ministry among children and young people,
and ask for courage, kindness and wisdom
as they help children and young people to flourish in faith.
We give thanks for all who work in safeguarding,
and ask that we would all be more aware of the signs of abuse,
and work to make our church communities
places of safety and sanctuary.

We long for your kingdom where the weak are defended.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
as Azeem Rafiq’s testimony shines a light on institutional racism in cricket
and on the damage caused by bullying, abuse and unjust systems;
we pray for fresh courage for all who work tirelessly for racial justice,
and for all who challenge the status quo to urge change.
May we never be bystanders to distress
but ready to speak for the voiceless;
more urgent in our cry for equal treatment of all
and more insistent that our churches reflect genuine diversity.

We long for your kingdom of justice and freedom.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
we pray for the homeless and for the displaced peoples of the world;
for people who sleep on the street in the cold of the night;
for migrants who have become pawns in a proxy war on the border of Belarus;
and for all children who are victims of adult wars
that they would find shelter and comfort.
You made your home with us;
may we open our hearts to others.

We long for your kingdom of generous self-giving.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
we pray for standards in public life,
and ask that decisions would be taken that reshape parliament and defend democracy.
We pray that MPs would serve the needs of their constituents.
When political leaders fail us because of self-serving desire for status or power
and they do not show commitment to change,
may we be faithful in prayer for them and all leaders.
May we live as you taught us
placing the needs of others above our own;
and work for a world where status is unimportant and the least and last are first.

We long for the values of your upside-down kingdom!

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
we pray for the people of Ukraine as Russian troops gather on the border
and for people endangered because of floods and landslides in Western Canada.
We pray for all who have been caught up in the terror attack in Liverpool:
for bystanders and for the driver of the taxi
whose quick thinking prevented a worse tragedy.
We ask that the motivations for this attack would be discovered
and that this incident would not give energy to those who wish to spread hatred.

We long for your kingdom of peace.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
we pray for all who feel alone or in despair
that you would be present in their suffering.
We pray today for all who work in mental health
asking for skill and tenderness as they seek to restore well-being.
We pray for all we know who are sick and ask for your healing.
In the quiet, we name people who need your peace today…
Surround all who are vulnerable with your care and compassion.

We long for your kingdom of wholeness and rest.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**

King of love,
through the challenges all around us,
keep our eyes fixed on you.
We pray for our friends and our families
in all their needs and their joys;
and we pray for our church communities
that we would be known by our love
and welcome all in need
just as you have welcomed us.

We long for your kingdom where we will all be at home.

You call us to follow you.
**Help us to hear your voice.**



**A sending out prayer**

Christ our King,
as we go from this place,
assure us of your presence with us –
for we belong to you.
Help us to look for truth in all places,
to seek and listen to your voice,
and to use your power to serve.
Bring heaven to earth and reign in our lives.
We pray in your name, Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**

1. Matthew 13.1-23 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://premierchristian.news/en/news/article/church-of-england-says-no-evidence-asylum-seekers-are-converting-to-christianity-to-stay-in-country?utm_source=Premier%20Christian%20Media&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12802488_daily%20news%2018%20November%202021&dm_i=16DQ,7MEGO,KCOFX7,V1IF2,1> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. https://www.premierchristianity.com/testimonies/i-was-a-muslim-but-jesus-woke-me-from-a-coma-and-healed-me-now-my-whole-family-believes/5642.article **Joann Doyle is the co-founder of Uncharted Ministries, which calls believers to join God’s great harvest field among Jews and Muslims.**

**Read more testimonies in *Women Who Risk* (W Publishing) by Tom and JoAnn Doyle, from which this article was adapted.** [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.premierchristianity.com/have-it-your-way-just-about-works-at-breakfast-time-but-its-a-terrible-way-of-running-a-church/5653.article [↑](#endnote-ref-4)