**15th May 2022**

All around us new life is emerging,
though we may not see it yet.
All around us, God makes things new.
Let us open our eyes and see –
see the new things God is doing,
see God at work in and among us!



**A gathering prayer**

God of our past, present and future,
help us to see you at work in your creation –
as flowers lift their heads to the sun,
or trees shake their leaves.
Help us to see you at work in our daily lives,
in our routines and choices,
in our growing and our changing.
Help us to see you at work in all things.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Come, let us praise the name of the Lord,
the one whose name is so great,
whose glory is above the earth and the heavens.
Come, let us praise the name of the Lord,
who was and is and is to come.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of adoration**

Lord of the heavens and the earth,
Lord of all creatures above and below ground,
Lord of the oceans, the ebb and flow of tides:
**Lord of everything, your glory and majesty is supreme.**

Lord of all our yesterdays, written in the pages of history.
Lord of what is to come, the story that is yet to unfold.
Lord of our now, your presence among us:
**Lord of everything, your glory and majesty is supreme.**
**Amen.**



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

**A prayer of confession**

Lord, you gave a commandment to love one another.
You loved your disciples of old; you love us today.
You will continue to love into eternity.
Help us each day to give life to your words
by sharing and showing your love to one another.
It’s not always easy and often we slip up.
Sometimes what we say can be hurtful.
Sometimes what we do can cause pain.

**We are sorry, Lord, for saying or doing what we shouldn’t.**
**Forgive us, and help us to live out your words in our lives today.**
**Help us to speak and show your love to one another**
**and sow it forward into the future.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Jesus knows our flaws, yet loves us unconditionally.
Be assured of his forgiveness.
He has wiped our slate clean.
New beginnings beckon.
Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ.
**Amen.**



**Revelation 21.1-6**

The exam season is on us once again. You know it’s coming: the weather improves, and the pollen levels go high and lots of anxious teenagers get more irritable than normal. It is even more acute this year because there hasn’t been in person exams for two years due to the pandemic. So, our thoughts and prayers go out to those sitting GCSEs, A levels over the coming month or so and we hope you hold your nerves and do yourself justice.

When I was at primary school, many years ago now, one year I had a male teacher who had two categories. You either got written on your end of school year report ‘Has worked well’ or you got the words ‘Could do better’. Sometimes he would even make the effort of adding another word: ‘Very good: has worked well’ or ‘Disappointing: could do better.’ He was the kind of teacher who enjoyed using his red pen and identifying all your faults.

These were the days when you were ranked in your class 1 to 30. Do you remember that: the bad old days? He would take delight in telling the whole class how good or bad you were. A bit like the Eurovision song contests: Royaume-Uni Nil point. No place to hide.

At number 30 we have Paul Hughes (could do a lot better!). At number 29 Sharon Smith (could do better but at least you didn’t come last). In case you’re wondering – I always came second, behind Jane Vincent. There was one year when we tied for first place but every other year it was Second place Helme (has worked well – but not as well as Jane Vincent).

Oh, the trauma of it all: being graded, classified, and allotted your ranking. Some people never seem to quite recover from it all.

Passing exams isn’t everything. You might be exceptionally good at maths – but you could do better as a human being…. There is more to life than grades and results don’t have to define who you are.

As we continue a short season looking at the Book of Revelation that Rod started last week, we come to the view of the future new world in Revelation 21.

Our politically correct lectionary stops the reading at verse six after it describes the Holy City the New Jerusalem. Verses 7-8 describe who will get in and who won’t.:

***7****Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children.****8****But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.’*

First lot: has worked well. Second lot: could do better – good-bye.

Rod said last week that Revelation was written at a time when Christians were fiercely persecuted. Many died martyrs’ deaths. You can imagine their perspective that life is made up of the good and bad. No shades of grey. You were either on the wrong side of history or the right side of history. If you have suffered dreadfully for your faith – you long for vindication. You long for a reward: that it was all worthwhile. We get the Holy City and the new heaven. Our enemies are cast into the second death.

We live in highly polarised times, when public discussions and attitudes can be at extremes and people shout at each other and condemn each other for being wrong. There is something about human nature that can make us look for the goodies and the baddies the right and the wrong in all situations.

Russia bad. War in Ukraine – wrong. Are all Russians bad? Is there any hope for peace and reconciliation?

Abortion – wrong. Always? The rights of the unborn versus the rights of the mother over her body.

Party gate – Beer gate – cast your judgements.

You don’t need to be religious to be judgemental.

Sometimes you have to make a judgement. Sometimes it best to refrain from judging others – less you yourself are judged.

The way of Jesus is primarily the way of mercy and compassion. This week we will start the 9 Beats course – looking at the beatitudes from the Sermon of the Mount as a concise summary of the ninefold Path of Jesus: what does it mean to follow the way of Jesus. Can we articulate a compelling vision for living the good life in this world? I believe the way of Jesus leads to truth and freedom and life in all its fulness. I hope this experimental course will convince you of that too and especially for younger people – looking for a vision of a better way to live.

Christian Aid Week reminds us of the climate crisis and the injustices wrecked on other parts of the world. If God were to give us a school report – you can bet your life we don’t fall into the ‘has worked well’ camp. We are all in the must do better category. Under judgement.

Christians are an odd mixture between pessimists and optimists. We are pessimistic about human nature knowing how we are all affected by sin. We should not be surprised at hypocrisy, smiling at someone one moment then calling them a bigot in private. We shouldn’t be surprised at people serving their own needs and not the needs of the greater good, or the public. We are all tempted to betray our ideals and our integrity. There has always been a spiritual and moral battle ever since Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.

And yet as Christians we are called to be optimistic – because we believe behind all reality is a loving God who has a purpose and destiny for all of creation- and that destiny is good. The last book in our Bible, the Book of Revelation, gives such an optimistic view of the future that gives hope for the present. This Easter season prompts us to imagine the splendour of the new life that God is creating. Those who follow Christ are commissioned to live *now* in the present of God’s promises of new beginnings, acting together with God to work toward their fulfilment.

Dreams are what enliven people of every age. They give a vision of what is possible and help set the course for the future. Revelation helps us imagine the dreams that gave shape to the life of the early disciples and can inspire some dreams of our own.

The psycho analysts Jung and Freud famously tried to interpret our dreams as revealing our unconscious selves. They said Jung saw dreams as messages from a good friend you didn’t know you had. Freud saw dreams as pornographic messages from a friend you wish you could get rid off.. I want to concentrate on God inspired dreams today. The vision that is before us and that can inspire us to work and live for the kingdom of God and make a difference in our society.

Revelation 1:1 tells us that this book is the record of John’s visions concerning “what must soon take place.” The dating and the style of language lead most scholars to say Revelation was not written by the apostle John or the author of the gospel of John. This John was a Christian prophet, speaking a vision of God’s word to seven early churches.

The term for this kind of revelation is *apocalypse*, meaning “unveiling.” – Literally to “lift the veil.” God is trying to reveal something otherwise hidden from view. In the words of the character Morpheus in the film, *The Matrix*, the “veil” is “the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.” John’s vision lifts that veil and reveals the world as God sees it. Neo in the film the Matrix, takes the red pill and sees reality, not an illusion. It is the world the Bible often calls “heaven,” the place where God lives and reigns – but where there is a spiritual battle going on against the forces of evil that seek to dominate humanity and cause destruction in the world and separate us from the love of God. It tells how ultimate victory will be through the Lamb of God who self sacrificially gave his life – to overcome the violence in the world through love.

Apocalyptic writing seeks to encourage people in the midst of their struggles. Revelation was likely written around 95 CE, near the end of the reign of the Roman emperor, Domitian. Christians were scattered throughout the Roman Empire. There had been some persecution of Christians under emperors Nero and Caligula. Domitian insisted that he be called “My Lord and My God.” Christians refused to pledge allegiance to him in this way and were punished for their refusal. Would they continue to hold to their faith, their allegiance to following the way of Jesus – of love for neighbour, love for even their enemies in the face of provocation to violence and retaliation? John says hold firm to following the Lamb of God – His way will ultimately triumph.

A central tenet of Judeo – Christian beliefs is that God created the universe for a purpose; therefore, history has meaning and purpose. Accordingly, history is not an endless cycle where events are destined to repeat themselves, but rather a path with a destination. As the bible begins with creation in Genesis, so it ends with re-creation in Revelation.

I was on a railway station a while back and there was a poster advertising Richard Dawkins latest book ‘the Greatest Show on Earth’ – evidence for evolution. Dawkins is a very outspoken atheist who wants to see the end of delusional belief in God. The strap line for the poster was ‘life changing’ – a clever play on words referring to evolution. I don’t find many people jumping up and down declaring with joy the life changing decision they made to become an atheist and how their life has found new meaning and hope. The reality of atheism is at best an ambivalence towards life – at worst a pessimism towards life. Life is random – a game of chance – anything could happen and if you’re lucky you might get a decent experience of life but there is no guarantee.

For the Christian, we are not a mistake; we are not here by pure chance. Christians disagree about evolution and whether God may have used evolutionary processes to get where we are now. But we believe that behind all things is a Creator. We have always said God is eternal – not bound by time and space. Philosophers argue that there has to be an eternal being outside of the temporal process of cause and effect that started things off and will be there at the end – the alpha and the omega – the beginning and the end. That view point is reflected in the Book of Revelation. That should give you a deep assurance for the future.

The focus scripture speaks of a New Jerusalem “coming down” from heaven, the place of perfection. It has inspired poets and the hymn writers and political idealists throughout the generations.

*And did those feet in ancient times*

*Walk upon England’s mountains green……..*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England’s green & pleasant Land*

William Blake’s poem implies that a visit of Jesus would briefly create heaven in England, in contrast to the "dark Satanic Mills" of the [Industrial Revolution](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Industrial_Revolution).. But that was then; now, we are faced with the challenge of creating such a country once again. Political idealists have used the imagery time and again. What are today’s satanic mills that threaten to destroy heaven on earth? Can we build Jerusalem again?

Jerusalem, the central and most important point in the world for Jews (and at this early stage the church was predominately Jewish in self-understanding), is portrayed as a character in a wedding ceremony.

When I prepare couples for marriage we look at life stages of our relationships. How the initial stages of a relationship there might be an idealisation stage – putting your partner on a pedestal, repressing negative feelings – then there might be a stage of disappointment and disenchantment when you become aware of your partner’s weakness and resent the concessions you have to make and renegotiation is needed. There is a productivity phase of intense activity career building and child rearing but that can lead to a power struggle or resentment, especially if you have avoided the renegotiation of earlier stages. When the children leave home and careers peak there will be a need for redefinition and then post parenting and retirement can be time of crisis especially if communication has been poor throughout the relationships – or alternatively it could be a golden time.

As for setting out on marriage – the wedding bride coming down the aisle – so the imagery could be applied to the stages of our faith. Faith has often been described in the same terms as falling in love. Sebastian Moore, a Catholic theologian said that ‘Prayer and faith must be a falling in love, otherwise its useless and a bore’.

How do you fall in love? Are you still in love with God – does following Jesus still excite you – send your heart skipping a beat? Or is it all mundane – dull – boring. What stage are you in with regards to your faith? In all stages renegotiation is needed to keep the relationship alive. The Book of Revelation was giving an inspiring vision, in the midst of hardship – to keep the believers going – it will all be worth it in the end!

Wedding brides anticipate a consummation – a great union. With most couples living together before they get married perhaps this analogy has lost some of its power and meaning. We live in relationship with God now – but as Paul put it in that famous passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 - that is often read out at weddings – we know only in part – one day we will fully know as we are fully known. The veil will be removed. Consummation at last – full intimate union with our God.

In this new time of living, God will remove death and tears. The time of human pain will have passed. At the same time, the sea is “no more.” For ancient Jews, the sea was a threatening place. With it gone, there would no longer be any chaotic forces that resist God’s sovereign love. There would be “a new heaven and a new earth”– perfect, holy, and in union with God.

The chaos around at the moment is connected with the economy and the war in Ukraine.

This new heaven and new earth are not meant to completely replace the old, for that would mean that human history is ultimately unimportant to God. The vision is one of renewal. Like the plant in the seed, the new has been present in the old all along.

Perhaps the past informs the present, but the scripture reading for today invite us to also imagine how the future informs the present. When we place ourselves in God’s presence, new possibilities for life and service become visible. How do glimpses of God’s new heaven and new earth inspire us to help bring renewal right here, right now?

When we see death and decay around us, and see suffering humanity – can we hold on to hope that this is not the last word – and trust in God’s recreation and resurrection of life?

When we go out on the street collecting for Christian Aid in the next fortnight – we may get many setbacks and closed doors. Can we hold on to the hope that God’s ultimate purpose is that poverty will be over and people will not hunger and that every tear will be wiped away?

When exam results don’t turn out as we hope can we hold on to hope that God will still bring good out of our lives – something new is coming….

To truly be church is to *be* New Jerusalem in the world: to be a place where God and God’s Lamb reign in justice and abundance for all people; a place whose gates are always open and whose light always shines; a place of great joy where the darkness of violence, exploitation, and death is banished – which is really what verse 8 is all about – cast out into the second death (21:8).

Revelation is not a word of doom and gloom, but a vibrant and exciting call to live *now* in God’s reign – to be hopeful and work and pray for glimpse of the new order breaking through now.

Do you thirst for that?

Come drink from the spring of the water of life.



**Prayers of intercession**

God of the past, the present and the future, 'What next?' is such a big question – but we trust you for all that is it to come as we pray for countries in turmoil.

Those where entire cities have been destroyed and infrastructures paralyzed: in Syria, in Ukraine, in Yemen and in many more places.

May the old order of war pass away
and a new order of peace flourish:
**in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

We pray for countries and communities where crops have been decimated and livestock have perished.

May the old order of famine pass away
and a new order of abundance flourish:
**in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

'What next?' is such a big question for young people too.

We pray for those around the world thinking about careers, about next steps; for all  – especially girls and young women in Afghanistan and elsewhere – who are denied an education; for those who struggle to see a future for themselves at all.

May the old orders of pressure and prejudice pass away
and a new order of confidence and opportunity flourish:
**in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

'What next?' is such a big question for those who feel at the end of their strength.

We pray for those caring for children with complex needs; for those caring for family with dementia or chronic illness; for those suffering from depression; for those worn out by grief.

May the old order of struggle pass away
and the new order of support flourish:
**in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

'What next?' is such a big question for our churches and for ourselves.

We pray for wisdom for those who guide and lead; for resilience for congregations amid indifference; and for ourselves as we navigate the challenges of living faithfully today, tomorrow and the next day.
**in Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Lord, you are the beginning and end of all things.
Help me to live this day well,
from its beginning to its ending.
Help me to live my life well,
from its beginning to its ending.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

God, who is Alpha and Omega,
the beginning and the end of all things,
you know our past – the burdens we carry.
We know that you will wipe away every tear
and make all things new –
though we cannot always see the work you are doing,
help us to learn from the past,
live in the present,
and hope for the future.
In all of life’s joys and sadnesses,
may we love one another as you love us.
**Amen.**