**17th July 2022**

**Call to worship**

Listen to the words of Jesus Christ!
Seize the moment with both hands!
Let us come together to listen and to learn,
as we seek to be his servants.

**A gathering prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, we come to you,
burdened by our insecurities and responsibilities.
Sometimes we are not valued for what we are,
but for what other people want to make us.
But we know you love us for what and who we are,
and this sets us free to be our fullest selves,
disciples, following your way, and learning from you.
May we listen and learn together today.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

God of welcome,
we are welcomed to be with you – as we always are.
In this moment, in this time
be real to us, be known to us,
let us hear your Word,
know its truth and follow its leading.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

God Almighty, Father and Mother, Son and Spirit,
you are the Word of life.
You are the Word of truth.
You are the Word of love.
You are the Word of hospitality.
You are the one above and beyond all else.
Yours is the Word to be heard and listened to.
Yours is the voice in eternity.
You are the Alpha and the Omega.
You are the beginning and the end.
You are.
You are our God.
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

Blessed, Holy God, your Word has been spoken,
your voice heard, your desire known.
You speak to our every moment,
our every breath, our every deed, and yet…
so often even if we hear, we do not listen…
and, even when we do listen, we do not always follow.
Blessed, Holy God, forgive us for being inattentive,
deaf to your word and your ways.
Forgive us, Holy God.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

The God of creation,
the God of Word and deed,
the God of all that has been and all that will be,
calls us to confess and assure us that our sins,
our failings, our falterings, our stammerings are forgiven.
If we listen, we will hear God’s promise:
‘My child, your sins are forgiven, go in peace, go in love.’
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

We give you thanks and praises, Lord God,
for your Word in Ancient times,
and your Word that set the world in motion.
**We offer our thanks and praise.**
For your Word to prophet, priest and king,
and your Word to Abraham and Sarah.
**We offer our thanks and praise.**
For your Word to Jew and Gentile,
and your Word to rich and poor.
**We offer our thanks and praise.**
For the stories of Jesus that bring your Word to life,
and the freedom we have to hear and listen to your Word.
**We offer our thanks and praise.**
For your Word to the disciples and early followers,
and your Word to us, to our families, our neighbours and friends.
**We offer our thanks and praise.**
And may our thanks and praise be lived,
in our listening and doing, and caring and sharing.
**Amen.**

**Letting go of distraction.**

**Distraction or catalyst**

**Explore different ways of concentrating.**

You will need: a selection of newspapers and magazines.

* When do you listen to music? Do you listen to music while doing work that requires concentration – e.g. reading, writing? If so, how does the music help you? If not, why is that? Are there times when it is good not to have any distractions, and how would you achieve that?
* Invite people to form small groups – ideally of mixed generations – and talk through these questions. Encourage them to notice the range of responses – we are all different. In what circumstances might our own choices or preferences be affected by what others prefer?
* After a while, introduce another topic: prayer. Does background music help you pray/meditate? Or is it a distraction? Mary stopped everything to listen to Jesus; are there times when we should do the same?
* Invite people to write down one or more things that they feel distracts them from following Jesus as they think they should. It might be something big, such as a personal tragedy that really threatens their faith. Or maybe it is something small, for example being distracted by dust or dead flowers rather than focus on praying. Or, indeed, anything in between.
* Ask everyone to think about what they have written for a few moments, then to crumple up the paper as a leader prays:
‘Lord Jesus,
you loved both Martha who was worried and distracted by many things,
and Mary who found the time to be with and listen to you in a quiet corner.
Help us to know when the time is right to put aside distractions
and find that quiet space,
and find you.
**Amen.**

**Luke 10.38-42**

School holidays will start at the end of this week. Sometimes when you start a holiday the weather seems to play a joke on you. The weather is always good until the moment when your holiday starts and then it turns nasty. Families with young children tied to school holidays are all hoping the opposite is the case this year.

Holidays are important times to rest and relax and if they go wrong we can feel cheated. The anxiety over whether your flight will be cancelled at the last minute, or if you get covid and have to cancel are two present and novel challenges to trying to get a break. They fuel a certain amount of anxiety that makes many wonder if it’s worth it.

A lot of us are restless and don’t know how to rest. We live in a work centred culture were people feel they have to justify their existence by what they do and compete with each other over how hard they work and consequently how valuable they are. It is a bit of a slur to be called a slacker or work-shy.

Jesus visits the home of Martha and her sister Mary. Mary finds time to sit and listen to Jesus, but Martha is too busy with her chores. Martha grumbles about the lack of help from her sister, but Jesus suggests that, right now, listening to what he has to say is the most important thing to be done.

The story of Mary and Martha has sometimes been used to enrol Jesus on the side of those working for the emancipation of women from domestic roles, or by those who see domestic hospitality as a lesser form of discipleship or mission. But is either of these really the point? How should we respond to Jesus?

When we read this story in church most church folk sympathise with Martha who when Jesus arrives at her home, works hard, doing her duty, being hospitable to the guest whilst her sister Mary just sits at the feet of Jesus and listens to him. Most church folk find it a little bit disturbing, shocking or even annoying that Jesus seems to gently reprimand her and suggests that Mary has made the better choice of stopping her work to spend time just talking with him.

Some commentators suggest that in the story of Martha, Luke introduces someone who has lost a sense of proportion. The contrast between the two sisters is not between service and listening but between the attentiveness of the disciple and the anxious uproar of someone who is missing the opportunity of the moment.

What was so necessary that Martha's desire to offer hospitality missed it? This must be about more than the actual event. Jesus was not simply saying he wasn't hungry! He was certainly offering support for Mary who was giving him single-minded, attentive, unqualified discipleship. Martha, by contrast, was ignoring all that he was offering her: the opportunity to step out of her role as a woman, dictated by culture and religion, and become a disciple.

Jesus came as the one whose kingdom broke through convention and inherited piety. In the section previous to this in Luke’s gospel, the story of the Good Samaritan, a Samaritan – an apostate Jew – practised the love of neighbour. In this encounter, a woman listened as though she were a rabbi's disciple and was praised, not chastised, for going beyond her station in life (cf Romans 14.17).

A prayer in a past edition of the URC Prayer Handbook picks up this point about being distracted.

*It seems to me that it’s not Martha’s serving that is the problem. Not her care for visitors and her desire to welcome them well.*

*It is her distraction.*

*I get distracted Lord from the things that are important. Far easier to let everyone think I am busy than to really discern the things that matter and pursue them.*

*Mary must have been happy to sit at your feet and listen. But that’s a hard thing to do when others are bustling around humphing at you for not doing your share of the work – giving you the feeling that you are a malingerer.*

*Mary must’ve focussed and listened and had no distraction as she attended only on her Lord.*

*Give me this singleness of purpose Lord.*

*Let none distract me this day from being in your presence.*

Our government is in flux from a series of resignations and is in the process of selecting a new Prime Minister. Last week I told the story of how Sajid Javid resigned from the cabinet prompting a further 60 resignations eventually the Prime Ministers, after having attended the [National Prayer Breakfast](https://cte.org.uk/nppb2022-mikeroyal/)  Over 700 MPs and church leaders met in the Houses of Parliament ‘to pray for our Parliament, government and politics, to build relationships between church leaders and their local MPs, and to reflect upon the relevance of the Christian faith to our public life.’ This year’s preacher was the founder of [Street Pastors](https://www.streetpastors.org/), Rev.Les Isaac OBE. – an inspiring speaker. He said,**‘**It’s important that we understand that the God who loves us, he’s willing to *give* us hope and to use us to *bring* hope.’ Street Pastors bring hope; caring for, helping and listening to folk out between 10pm ­– 4am, equipped with water, flip flops and prayer![[1]](#endnote-1)

How do we become people of love and hope? In the passage, Mary chooses to seize the opportunity to listen to Jesus and put on hold the ‘doing’ she might have planned. She chose the best thing; to listen to God and know God’s heart.

**Our doing for others is important, but to do it with the compassion of God is to take time to pray and listen. When God calls us to action, are we taking time to listen? Rev Isaac has said that to be called to do something and bring in his kingdom, that is the Gospel.**

When we choose to help others, let’s listen to seek what God is thinking and doing there. When we have the instinct to be like Martha, try to be like Mary first.

In what activities do you most need to pause and pray first?

I wonder if we will be distracted on our holidays and end up being stressed; doing a bit of work, feeling guilty for taking things easy – especially if another member of our household is still working. Retired people seem to work hard these days! Some are working harder than when they were employed.

The biblical idea of Sabbath and rest is not just about relaxing and doing nothing or taking time out.

The Sabbath formalised the fourth Commandment:

*‘Remember to keep the Sabbath day holy. Six days shall you labour and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath and should be kept holy’*

Even 2-4000 years ago they recognised that it is damaging to society and individuals if you spend all your time pursuing economic gain, making money and chasing materialism. We need to rest from all that and find time to appreciate the life we are so busy trying to achieve.

We are called to be human beings not human doings. We all need time to be – time to rest, relax and enjoy. So we should make time to be open to ourselves to rest and find renewal so we can regain a sense of purpose and direction and new energy for the task that lies before us.

The story is told of two woodsmen. One woodsman challenged the other woodsman to an all-day wood-chopping contest. The challenger worked hard all day long, pausing only for a brief lunch. On the other hand his opponent took several breaks during the course of the day and also took a leisurely lunch.

Well, the end came to the all-day wood chopping contest and the challenger was surprised (and annoyed) to find out that his opponent had cut more wood than he! So, the challenger said, "You cut more wood than I did, even though I worked longer."

To which the other woodsman responded, "What you did not realize is that I was sharpening my axe, every time I sat down to rest." 

Rest is vital. Rest is imperative, if we are to be effective.

We have the concept of going on retreat in the Christian tradition – in the same way that Jesus would retreat from the crowds, go up mountains or set sail in a boat. Its purpose is to get away from the routine of daily life, the busyness and the distractions – to relax and find refreshment and also to be open to yourself – catching up with yourself – how is life going/ what are the stresses, can you get things into focus again, look at the state of your relationships, space to stand back and take stock – to be open to yourself.

The second biblical concept about rest is the rest for society allowing communities and nations to get back into shape. The Law books of the Old Testament were written to try and shape what the community of Moses hoped would lead to a society which led to good living. One of their ideas in the book of Leviticus was the idea of the year of jubilee. Every fifty years debts would be cancelled, slaves freed and everyone would go back to being equals and start again from a level playing field.

It is no surprise that that law was never enacted – even though it is written in the Bible as coming from the mouth of God. Imagine in the first 49th year all the powerful; and wealthy leaders of society thinking we’ve got to give all this up next year. Don’t be stupid!!!

The Bible has a lot to say about economics, money, justice and a fair world – it’s a dangerous book. It inspired the Tolpuddle Martyrs a bunch of Methodists, who formed the first trade union in this country in 1834. They were six farm labourers who got together to act in solidarity against the cutting of their wages and were deported to Australia. They were [pardoned](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardoned) in 1836 after mass protests by sympathizers and returned to England between 1837 and 1839.

The Tolpuddle Martyrs became a popular cause for the early [union](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trade_union) and [workers' rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Workers%27_rights) movements. The annual festival is happening this weekend, the third weekend in July every year in Tolpuddle Dorest. They were inspired to action by reflecting on their faith.

It is what happens when you are open to God. Holiday comes from the two words ‘holy’ and ‘day’. The idea of the Sabbath was not just to work then rest and play but also to pray. Get away from the distractions and busyness of daily life and earning a living and have time to rest but also to find again the true centre of your life. To make time to be centred on God – get your perspective back in balance – make time to reflect on what you’re living for, what gives life meaning, why are we here? Why is there something and not nothing? Where does our sense of love, beauty, justice, hope come from?

Indulge yourself in a bit of contemplation – which is always good for the soul. Sit and stare at a night sky, look at the beauty of a flower. Take in the view from a mountain top, wander into a church and pause for fifteen minutes of silence. Be open to the possibility of God and an encounter with God.

And of course, Sundays are our weekly Sabbath. You come to church to put aside the distractions of life and be with the Lord to get a sense of God’s perspective and call on your life.

How discriminating are we about the things that fill our day-to-day existence? When many urgent considerations disappeared in lockdown, people gained some surprising insights into why they did what they did, sometimes painfully so.

Martha here followed her routine with increased vigour. Mary saw that today could be different and left her to it! Do you admire her, or find her a bit unattractive? Single-minded people can be a bit off-putting, or a bit irritating! Have you ever had a friend who was impossible to lure out for a drink, or to a film, because he or she was working for an exam, or needing to get on with the end-of-year figures – or something like that? Maybe when it comes to finding the opportunities to ‘listen for God’ we all need to be a bit less concerned about how other people see us. Maybe, sometimes, we need to be irritating! Not ‘just because’, but because we’ve thought about it, and we’re confident that we’ve seized an opportunity too important to let pass by.

How good are we at freeing ourselves from the tyranny of our own habits, or the sense of others’ expectations of us? Do such things keep us from seizing moments to find God’s purposes for us?

Holidays – a great time to be open and free from distractions. Mary found that rest at the feet of Jesus, Martha was distracted by too many things that at that moment needn’t have distracted her. I hope you find the time this summer to rest –and be open to yourself, to others and to God.



**Prayers of intercession**

A short response is appropriate after each bidding – e.g. **Lord, hear us.**

In this moment Lord, we bring our prayers and our concerns for others.

The world seems so full of problems way beyond our imagining and understanding. Emergencies seem to be almost daily and we move from one to another so quickly. But these emergencies are still there and people are still impacted and in need. Our prayers we bring knowing that even if we fail to listen to you, you always listen to us, you listen to our words, our silences, our yearnings and our longing.

For those in crisis this day, we pray that someone will listen to them.

For those in poverty and destitution, we pray that someone will give them a gift.

For those in pain and anguish, we pray that someone will offer relief.

For those who are hungry, we pray that someone will feed them.

For those who are thirsty, we pray they may be given clean water.

For those in grief, we pray that someone will simply be with them.

For those who are near the end of life, we pray that someone will hold their hand.

For those who are lonely, we pray they may be befriended.

For those who are frightened, we pray they may be soothed and calmed.

Lord, there are so many needs of so many people in so many places, we remember now…

Those seeking to rule our country, may they do so with justice, honesty and compassion, seeking an agenda for all and not just for themselves; may those who wish to lead listen to the needs and voices around them.

Those in Ukraine facing uncertain futures with the war seeming to be an ongoing crisis they are living through. And for those who have left family and friends behind and moved to neighbouring countries, including our own, may we, with others, listen to their stories and their anguish.

For the people of Sri Lanka where seemingly the cost of living is daily forcing thousands into poverty way beyond our understanding.

For the people of Afghan whose freedoms and life choices are being daily eroded by a government who fails to listen to the voices of the world.

For those who fear the impacts of climate change, who are challenged by excessive heat and flood.

For those in our own country who are hungry this day, may they find the kindness and support of neighbours and strangers, of foodbanks and more, to feed not just their bodies but their minds and their souls.

For refugees risking all they have left, life and limb, to escape to a country which is safer, more secure and more welcoming.

For those seeking purpose and point in life, may someone listen to them and bring them to you.

For those in dark places, may they see light and here words of comfort and welcome and hospitality.

Lord, these are our prayers this day, we offer them and ourselves. knowing you hear our every word.

Lord, hear us and bless those for whom we pray.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Mary wanted to listen,
Martha wanted to serve,
**show me how I can be your friend.**
Everyone is different,
**show me how I can be your friend.**
When I want to be close to you,
**show me how I can be your friend.**
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord, send us out into the world,
alert to whatever nudges us to hear you calling,
or whatever points us in your way.
Make us bold to resist those who would keep us
in the comfortable well-trodden paths,
so that – like Mary – we can break free from time to time,
to sit at your feet.
**Amen.**

1. <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2022/120-july-august-2022-c/proper-11/the-week-in-focus> *Dr Angela Mak is a Licensed Lay Minister at*[*Holy Trinity Shaw*](https://www.htschurch.org.uk/)*in the*[*Ecumenical Partnership of West Swindon and Lydiard Tregoze*](https://www.htschurch.org.uk/partnership-churches/)*. She is also a schools worker, and retired biology teacher.* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)