**3rd July 2022**

**Call to worship**

*based on Psalm 66*

Let us make a joyful noise,
singing glory to God,
offering glorious praise.
Let us say to our God:
‘How awesome are your deeds.
Holy is your name.’

**A gathering prayer**

Holy, holy, holy Lord,
we rejoice in all that you have done.
We gather to praise you
and to reflect on how we can play our part in your work.
Holy, holy, holy Lord, be with us now –
inspire us, enrich our worship and encourage our mission,
in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

We bring ourselves to this place, this moment in time,
we bring ourselves to worship you, O God.
We come knowing you and yet seeking to know you more,
to offer you our prayers and praises,
and to receive your blessing.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Creator God, you are our all,
you created and crafted us.
God of the journey,
you are our journey, our aim, our purpose, our goal.
God of welcome,
you receive each of us, no matter who and what we are.
God of peace,
you give us peace, and you call us to be one in you
and to share that peace.
**Amen.**

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

**A prayer of confession**

God of blessing and abundance, God of peace and love,
you have offered and given us so much,
you have revealed so much to us,
you have guided and guarded us on our life’s journey,
and yet…we are so often ungrateful.
So often we ignore what has been given.
So often we have failed to see all that you show us.
So often we have not sought peace with those around us.
So often we have not shared with others your word of love and peace.
Forgive us, O God, that your blessings have been squandered by us,
ignored by us, misused by us, abused by us.
Forgive us, O God, and in the silence of this moment,
accept our confession.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Blessed be you, Lord God, for your forgiveness.
Blessed be you, Lord God, for your guidance.
Blessed be you, Lord God, for your acceptance of us.
Blessed be you, Lord God,
that we can know our sins, our failings, are forgiven.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of praise**

We bless you, Holy God, that you journey with us:
That you hold us by the hand and guide us:
That you never force us or drag us:
That you accompany us on every step of life’s journey:
That you are with us in our waking and our sleeping:
That you are with us in stillness and our doing:
That you are with us in our journeying and our arriving
and our departing:
That from the moment of our birth to the moment of our dying
and beyond you are our God:
We bless you, Holy God, that you journey with us:
**Amen.**

**Sunday School Anniversary**

Loving God

We thankyou for

Those of past generations who have worshipped you here,

Those who in this place have taught the Christian faith to others

Those whose ministries have been a source of blessing in this church

Those who have faithfully served others through this congregation

Loving God

we thankyou for those who minister to us, especially our minster and elders

Those who are leaders and helpers in Tab Too and Tab Youth

Those who contribute to worship week by week

Those who look after the organizations and ministries of the church

Loving God we thankyou

For being here together in worship

For the story of your love which we hear in the Bible

For the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion

For those special moments when we are sure of your presence and hope through Jesus

Amen

**Galatians 6 verses 1-18**

Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia chapter six is one of the set lectionary readings for today.

In the whole letter Paul has been addressing a church which is bitterly divided. People in the churches saw themselves as one particular ‘type’ of Christian and looked down on other types. If they saw one of the others doing something wrong, they would feel smug; that, they would think, is not the way ‘we’ behave.

At the same time, these groups, were defined in terms of status, not detailed behaviour; ‘we’ (the Jewish Christians among them, or perhaps the richer Christians, or the ones who were Roman citizens?) were simply different because they were different.

Instead of the community Paul had established, where all were equal at the foot of the cross, all equally ‘In Christ’, all equally members of Abraham’s family, the work of the agitators had left a legacy of division based on non-theological factors.

It is desperately easy for this kind of attitude to creep into any church. Divisions in the wider society (class, gender, income, race, the sort of home you live in) can quickly lead one group of Christians to look down on another. Often the others sneer back. What has that got to do with the kingdom of God?

Paul might appear to contradict himself, saying first ‘carry each other’s burdens’ (Galatians 6.2) and then ‘all must carry their own loads’ (Galatians 6.5). But the combination makes sense.

Taking responsibility for ourselves – for our words and deeds, for the choices we make given our circumstances, for sustaining our own health and wellbeing – includes being honest about our mistakes and failures. Then we will have compassion on others for their failings.

Paul’s vision is the opposite of a blame culture. He advocates being realistic and gentle, both with ourselves and others.

There are many issues that divide us today and how we handle them will be a measure of our maturity in Christ.

The issue of abortion has been prominent in the news after the US Supreme Court [handed down an opinion which overturns Roe v Wade](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf), the controversial 1973 opinion which ruled that abortion up to 20 weeks was a constitutional right. The ruling returns the issue of abortion to the states and to people’s representatives.

While the ruling does not stop abortion in America from happening, some states have already indicated they will restrict abortions.

In America there is bitter divisions over this issue between those who are Pro-choice – defending the rights of the woman to decide on what happens to her body and those who are Pro-life who defend the rights of the unborn child.

As a man I often think what right have I to speak on this issue. But I know that I can hide behind that embarrassment to shirk responsibility for helping my church think through the various issues. I read an article the other day that criticized church leaders for not talking about abortion, saying that poverty, climate change, racism, women’s rights are regularly addressed from the pulpit but there is silence about the abortion debate.

I know it is a deeply personal and complex issue and I have had numerous pastoral situations in my ministry. When I was a newly ordained minister in my previous church before I came to Dursley, a woman in her 50s came to see me one day with a confession. Through her tears she told me how she had had two small children and found her self pregnant for the third time. Her husband was out at work from 7 in the morning until 7 in the evening, under the pretext of providing for the family, but not actually supporting the family. She had fallen into depression and was having suicidal thoughts thinking about a third demanding child. So, she had an abortion. But thirty years later it was still a scar and the guilt weighed her down. And we had to bring that guilt to God to have it dealt with.

*What does it mean to carry each other’s burdens?*

To consider the concerns of women and the concerns of the unborn?

Recent statistics showed in 2021, in England and Wales, nearly 215,000 abortions took place. In the UK, 70 per cent of women say they would like the gestational limit for abortion to be lower than the current 24 weeks. Strikingly, few women actually support free and unlimited abortion on demand, with no exceptions, up until birth. The majority clearly recognise that unborn children are entitled to some form of protection. This arguably was at the heart of the matter which led to Roe v Wade’s eventual overturning by the Supreme Court.

The US Supreme Court has recognised that it was wrong for nine male justices to implement an extreme blanket abortion regime on the entire country back in 1973.[[1]](#endnote-1) In contrast to countries like the UK, where abortion is illegal with exceptions, at the time, Roe v Wade put the US in a category of only six other countries – including China and North Korea – to legalise abortion through all nine months of pregnancy. While later case law allowed some states to choose to regulate abortion to some extent in the latter half of pregnancy, others, such as New Jersey and Oregon, put no term limits on the availability of the procedure. This stands in extreme contrast to Europe, where the median time limit for abortion on demand or on broad social grounds is 12 weeks’ gestation.

Times have changed since 1973, after all. We must be willing to follow the science. The widespread and common availability of the ultrasound has been one major advancement that should inform our treatment of unborn children. We now know that at six weeks, an unborn child has a beating heart and by 15 weeks, unborn children can suck their thumbs, have fully formed noses, lips, eyes and eyelids. Recent research shows that they may feel pain from twelve weeks, or even earlier.

The Bible is clear on the distinct value of each human life. God told Jeremiah: “I knew you before I formed you in your mother’s womb. Before you were born I set you apart.” ([Jeremiah 1:4-5](https://www.esv.org/Jeremiah%201%3A4-5/), NLT).

There is nothing like witnessing the birth of a child to make you reflect on where life comes from? Are we more than just the physical and the material? Do we have a soul? What is the essence of life? Is there a creator. Is this creator good and loving?

Catholics are adamant that life begins at conception. They are consistent in their approach not to mess around with nature by prohibiting the use of contraception. Protestants have had a more nuanced approach believing that God wants us to use our knowledge and development to help human flourishing and that we intervene in nature on so many occasions to arrest disease and illness for example. And of course, there is debate as to when life begins and is able to survive outside of the womb.

Let us not forget the gospel holds a radical message of human equality that changed the landscape of human rights forever – eradicating the social chasm between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female as Paul declares earlier in his letter to the Galatians. Arguably there would be no human rights but for the advent of Christianity. If you follow the science you are left with the survival of the fittest and the struggle for power.

It’s the message of hope that set the tone for justice for the oppressed in our world to this day. Yet the abortion industry arguably discriminates between children based on their age, their circumstances at conception, their ability to contribute to society and, in some cases, their sex or [whether they have a disability](http://www.premierchristianity.com/interviews/heidi-crowter-we-are-amazing-just-the-way-we-are-please-accept-us/13169.article).

Yet of course women have rights too and shoulder the burden for pregnancy and birth and the consequences of giving birth.**[[2]](#endnote-2)**

STOPPING ABORTION WONT STOP THE SUFFERING

The World Health Organisation estimates that 32 million unsafe abortions happen every single year. This latest ruling won’t result in fewer abortions taking place, it will result in them going underground, leading to immeasurable harm for desperate women pursuing illegal and unsafe means to terminate their pregnancies. Victims of incest and rape – abused children and women – could, in some US States, be forced to give birth, exacerbating their trauma. This doesn’t make me think of the love and grace of Jesus, but of the millstones and heavy burdens placed on people’s shoulders by the Pharisees ([Matthew 23:4](https://www.esv.org/Matthew%2023%3A4/)).

IT WILL ADVERSELY AFFECT WOMEN OF COLOUR AND WOMEN FROM LOW-INCOME BACKGROUNDS

In 2019, the abortion rate for black women in America was 23.8 per 1,000 women. For Hispanic women, it was 11.7 per 1,000. And for white women, it was 6.6 per 1,000. Half of all women who seek an abortion live below the poverty line. That tells us something important. The overturning of Roe v Wade will only make inequalities more entrenched. Women who can afford to will simply travel to states where they *can* terminate their pregnancies. Women who can’t will struggle to feed another mouth and clothe another body, sustaining the socio-economic inequalities that Christians should be railing against.

**WHAT ABOUT THE FATHERS?**

In this whole abortion debate, we rarely hear the word ‘father’ mentioned. It’s almost as if a baby appears in a womb as if by magic. It’s good and right that the men who father these children shoulder the burden and responsibility for them, so why are men being left out of this conversation?

In the UK, fewer than half of eligible children receive anything at all in child maintenance payments from their fathers. And single parents are currently owed nearly half a billion in unpaid child maintenance. The proportion of families *without* a child maintenance arrangement reached a whopping 44 per cent in 2019-2020, up 25 per cent on nearly a decade ago.

This leaves women in a precarious position, shouldering not just the mental and emotional load of having children, but the financial one, too.

**IT WILL LEAD TO MORE CHILDREN IN CARE**

One of the outcomes of changes to Roe v Wade is an expected increase in the number of children being placed in the US care system. Are those rejoicing at the news also ready to provide a safe and loving home for one or more children who will be born into a lifetime of institutional care?

Adoption is thankfully something Christians already think and care about, but how many of us actually step up and step out? American Christians who are passionately pro-life must now be ready to open their homes and hearts to children in desperate need of families.

In a perfect world, abortion wouldn’t exist. But we don’t live in a perfect world yet. We live in a fallen, broken world where women and children are raped, where fathers desert mothers and refuse – or fail – to support their children financially, and where governments decline to provide the support needed for families to thrive.

As Christians, we should absolutely pray and campaign for change, as well as labour to grow kingdom values here on earth.

Carry each other’s burdens.

It is imperative that we refuse to choose. Both lives in a pregnancy are worthy of care and protection and of course real life leads to horrible dilemmas that need compassion and grace not judgement and division.

Paul says ‘carry one another’s burdens’ (Galatians 6.2) and then ‘all must carry their own loads’ (Galatians 6.5).

When he says that this is ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2), he may be thinking of the saying preserved in Matthew 6.14 – ‘if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you’.

The law in question here is the law of love, the law of giving oneself in love and humility to the service of others. This, rather than showy behaviour which highlights one or two individuals, will be the sign that they are really spiritual. Jesus carried the cross for others, so Christians must carry one another’s burdens. If my neighbour sins today and I notice it, I must remember that it may well be me tomorrow. If it’s my responsibility to help put things right, I must do it without arrogance.

If you think you are something, someone special, then your attitude itself is evidence that you are not. You’re deceiving yourself – but probably nobody else.

Any church that takes these verses seriously will be on their way to the only victory that counts: the victory of the cross of Christ lived out in community and under the eyes of the wider world.

I remember a very emotional debate at general assembly of the URC about another divisive issue: assisted dying. In the middle of the debate a man stood up to share how his friend had motor neurone disease and was wasting away unable to help himself and who just wanted to die. In this wretched state he was pleading for assistance to end his life. The speaker’s voice broke and he became very emotional and tears formed in his eyes. He had to sit down and I noticed at that point the person who was sat behind him just leant forward and put his arm around him. The debate continued in a sensitive manner aware now of the human issues involved.

When it came to a vote, I noticed that the person who had put his arm round the man’s shoulder actually voted against assisted dying. They had disagreed but they had still born each other’s burdens.

How can we create communities and fellowships were there is that mutual care of each other? Some people will be private and not want others to know their business – hopefully they will have some confidents – that’s their choice. But they will run the risk of isolation and people not being aware that they could’ve done with some support. The other extreme is where people try to burden others with their problems and don’t take enough responsibility for their own affairs.

Here is the paradox of genuine community living: When it comes to my neighbour I must be sure to remain humble if I offer help; when it comes to myself, I must recognize my own responsibility for my actions. ‘Carry each other’s burdens’ is balanced by ‘everyone has his own burden to bear’ in verse 5.

Paul goes on to say that you’ll reap what you sow. If church members sow to the spirit – think about the fruit of the spirit in the previous chapter of Galatians– love , joy , peace patience ,goodness kindness, faithfulness gentleness and self control’ –– forming us in the character of Christ - they themselves will in due course bring in a harvest..

There is a moral principle that you reap what you sow. If you are open hearted and generous you are likely to receive generosity back. If your mean fisted and closed down – you’re likely to be isolated. If you sow from your sinful side you’ll reap the consequences of that sin. God may forgive you your sins but you still will have to live the consequences of those sins. Scars remain. You can’t trade on the forgiveness of God – God won’t be mocked – or fooled as it in our version. There is a moral law in the universe – you reap what you sow.

Finally in verses 11-16 Paul writes his own summary of the themes of the letter. He thinks it necessary to challenge his opponents again for advocating circumcision as a sign that they are better than those who are uncircumcised.

In sharp contrast Paul describes his own type of boasting. He boasts only of the cross of Christ (v. 14).

*May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*

The cross reveals to us as Christians that there is a God who created everything: who gives us life – but this God is not a stern uncaring law giver, but a life giver. We see that in Jesus who raised the lowly, fed the hungry and forgave the guilty– supremely on the cross as those who were crucifying him, Jesus prayed ‘Father forgive them they don’t know what they are doing’. This is the God Christians believe in, through the historical event of the cross and resurrection of Christ.

Paul says I want to boast not in my achievements, not in my status, not in anything we have done – but in Christ and in the cross – because it changes everything and gives us hope of a new creation– for there we are all equal – all receive mercy and grace.

The final words of this passionate letter, in which Paul has not withheld his frustration, nor his opinions, are words of grace:

*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers and sisters. Amen.*

Grace be with you.

**Prayers of intercession**

Blessed God, we have thought and reflected on peace and love, and now we bring our prayers, among others, for those who live without peace and those who find no love.

For those whose lives are lived with the backdrop of war, violence and conflict. Those whose families have been torn apart and fractured by the act of war; those who find themselves without home, without family, without love, cast adrift from what they know and what has nurtured them because others have acted callously and violently, greedily and selfishly. For those who live in fear each day of more attacks and more bombs and violence.

For those who have died in the cause of war and the family they leave behind, the lives that need to be remade, recovered and resolved.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For those whose homes and livelihoods have been all but washed away and destroyed in Pakistan and India, whose existence is at the best precarious, whose possessions such as that are left, are inadequate to meet their daily needs.

For the world as a whole as it contemplates the ravages of climate change, and the changes we as humanity will need to make to ensure safety, security and resilience for future generations.

As we pray for others, we pray also for ourselves that we may be prepared to make changes in our lifestyle for the greater good of those to follow.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For those who have lived, and who still live, in loveless households where violence and abuse are the norm. Where people live treading on eggshells for fear of the next abusive attack and violent outburst.

For those who fear for their safety on a daily basis, who inwardly cry for help but outwardly are fearful of asking for it.

For those who seek to help and bring into the open the abuse and who seek to offer love.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For those who are discriminated against because of gender identity, disfigurement, disability, religion or ethnic origin.

When we are all made in God’s image such discrimination seems to go against the commands to love our neighbours as ourselves, to treat others as we would like to be treated.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For those in authority, in business and government that they may see a way forward that is honest and respectful, that treats those in need with dignity, care and support, that they may offer hope and light to the underprivileged and those in need.

May society become a kinder more inclusive place that values the needs and respects the views of those around them.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For families and households across the world who are struggling and will struggle yet more, with the cost of living increases and commodity shortages that abound. For those who go without because they have no choice while others live excessive lifestyles. For those who feel forced into crime as a way of surviving and who end up in deeper darker more needy places as a result.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

For the lonely and the lost, the bereaved and the grieving, the ill and the dying, that hands of love, fellowship, hospitality and care may be stretched out to them. That warmth and love and light and hope may be passed by a gentle touch, a smile, a word.

God of peace and love:
**Bless those for whom we pray.**

Bless all these, oh God, for whom we have prayed, that they may come to know compassion from us and life from you.
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Where there is conflict,
**let there be peace.**
Where there is fearfulness,
**let there be peace.**
Where there is anger,
**let there be peace.**
Where there is violence,
**let there be peace.**
May God’s peace rest on our homes
**and all who live in them.**
**Amen.**

1. Lois McLatchie <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/society-has-devalued-childrens-lives-overturning-roe-v-wade-starts-to-right-that-wrong/13328.article> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Megan Cornwall <https://www.premierchristianity.com/opinion/im-a-pro-life-christian-but-heres-why-im-not-rejoicing-over-roe-v-wade/13342.article> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)