**17th May 2020**

**Call to worship**

Come to the living God,
to the Spirit promised by Jesus,
to the Comforter, our Advocate.
Come and worship.

**HYMN: R&S 294 Come down O Love Divine**

A prayer of approach

Gracious God, we come before you,
drawn by the power of your welcoming love.
We come with our sorrows and joys.
We come with our expectations and apprehensions.
We come with what we have done.
We come as who we are.
In your love we find peace and hope.
Amen.

A prayer of confession

God of love, we are sorry
that at times our love for you falters;
that we have wrong priorities;
that we overlook your guidance.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

Loving Saviour, we are sorry
that we disobey your commandments;
that we fail to love;
that we walk by on the other side.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

Spirit of truth, we are sorry
that we disregard your presence;
that our thoughts and feelings are unrighteous;
that we follow the world’s way.
O God, forgive us.
O God, renew us.

May your presence abiding in us lead us in the right way,
in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

You make yourself known to us, and you are present in our lives
even though we do not always recognise or acknowledge you.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

You do not leave us orphaned,
but embrace us with parental love that encourages and comforts us.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

You ensure that we are not alone
by filling us with your Spirit of truth, that inspires and empowers us.
For all that you are,
we thank you, loving God.

Thank you, Father, for your presence,
your love and your encouragement.
Amen.

**All Age:**

**Coronation – who watched who didn’t and why?**

**What was the one thing that stood out for you?**

**Do you think Charles will be like his mother or do you think they will be different?**

Family traits game

Explore how we represent our families

You will need: pen and paper for each person, box/container.

* Using pen and paper, ask each person to anonymously write four bullet points that describe their 'family', family traits or ways of living.
* Invite them to fold these up, place them in a box, then ask someone to pull one ‘family list’ out and read it aloud. Encourage the rest of the group to guess whose family it is.
* Ask: What would you expect to pull out if we were doing this activity as children of God?

Who do you think you are?

Discuss how we represent God

Together, watch Danny Dyer, actor from Eastenders, in the clip, discover that he is related to royalty.

* Ask the group if they know anything of the people they are descended from. How might they as young individuals try and represent their family now
* Remind the group that we are all part of God’s family.
* Spend time talking about how others might see God in us.
* What does it feel like to know that as Christians we show God to others?

 Jesus said ‘Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? 10Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father**,** living in me, who is doing his work.’

**Focus Scripture: John 14:15–21 Acts 17.22-31**

**SONG: (From Virtual choir recordings)**

**Holy Spirit, living breath of God Keith Getty Stuart Townend. CCLI Song 4779872.**

**SERMON**

To many of its readers, the [front page of last Tuesday’s *Daily Mirror*](https://reach.pressreader.com/daily-mirror/20230509/page/20) was a masterpiece of editing, reflecting two contrasting truths about modern Britain. The upper two-thirds displayed a large photograph of King Charles III, robed, enthroned, crowned, and holding an orb and sceptre, and a caption citing the King’s message, ‘Thank you to you all’. The lower one-third bore the banner headline ‘BILLS AGONY’ and the strapline ‘Two million households unable to pay at least one bill last month’, together with a small photograph of a couple poring over a household bill.

The truths expressed in these images and words stand in stark contrast to each other, although they by no means reflect the extremes. In the UK, there are [people even wealthier than the king](https://ceoworld.biz/2023/01/30/wealthiest-people-in-the-united-kingdom-january-30-2023/), and there are [people even poorer than those struggling with household bills](https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-outlook-2023/).

Last weekend’s coronation was an unashamedly Christian event. The crown, orb and both sceptres all bear the cross of Christ, symbolising the beliefs formally declared by Henry VIII and James VI (of Scotland) and I (of England) that the King is the Head of the Church of England and that his authority derives from God. The Church of England itself, its hierarchy dressed in their finest robes, was very much on display to the global viewing public. There was less formal drama outside Westminster Abbey as huge, excited – if rather damp – crowds waved flags and cheered the processions, while 64 people were detained by police for republican protests.

The day after the coronation, it was business as usual for the Church (albeit with an abundance of leftover bunting). A return to routine, as Christians have taken their places alongside colleagues of other faith traditions and none, in paid or voluntary roles, to continue making the world a better place, especially for the most vulnerable of our sisters and brothers.

This is the heart of Christianity: the celebration of the life and continuing ministry of a Saviour born, not in a king’s palace (as the Wise Men seemingly expected) but in the poorest of surroundings, and the continuation of his ministry by his spirit to bring hope to people in despair.

Our bible passage is the recollections of John in his gospel of what is known as Jesus’s farewell message to his disciples. What advice he gave them as he was about to leave them and be crucified. Many of these verses have become straplines for us as Christians as we live life without the physical presence of Jesus but instead relying on his spiritual presence.

***15****‘If you love me, keep my commands.*

***16****And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever –****17****the Spirit of truth.*

***27****Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives.*

*Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

Jesus says he will give his Spirit to guide us into truth and help us in his way.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor questions the various reasons people give for the decline of mainline churches such as music in worship, inept clergy, or too much investment in institutional survival. In Taylor’s experience, we should look more closely at the intellectualization of the church. She believes people want, “Not more *about* God but *More God*.” From the youngest to the oldest, we experience “more God” through Spirit-filled community where love is given free expression and prayer and study informs action and vice versa.

I think she is on to something. Even in our so-called secular society people still have a spiritual hunger.

In this passage in John 14, Jesus says he will give the gift of the Spirit to his disciples. He has promised to send us his own spirit, his own breath, his own inner life. They will not be left without encouragement. In this promise, the text hints at the meaning of the Spirit’s gift given at Pentecost. The Spirit comes as a gift from God, just as John’s gospel earlier portrayed Jesus as God’s gift (3:16). God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. Now God gives the Spirit.

A definition of a Christian is not just someone who follows Jesus Christ but someone who has also received his Spirit, his gift, who helps the disciple follow in the way of Jesus Christ.

In verse 16 Jesus names the Spirit with the Greek word *parakletos*. The word could be translated as helper, or counsellor, or comforter or advocate.

The word can be translated as ‘helper’ or comforter. Comfort is a strange and wonderful thing. Have you noticed how when someone is deeply distressed, say after a bereavement or a tragedy, the fact of having other people with them, hugging them and being alongside them, gives them strength for the next moment, then the one after that, then the one after that?

What was difficult in the pandemic was not being able to hug people or even shake their hands. We had to try to find new ways of comforting others.

Hope in God through Christ is the greatest strength I would argue. When the Spirit is spoken of as the ‘comforter’, this kind of extra strength to meet special need is in mind. Jesus later says he gives a peace that the world cannot give.

Brian was one of our church members in Dursley and he should have been seen by a doctor but because of the pandemic that was delayed. He ended up being admitted into hospital with some urgency and concern. Brian said to me, that he was naturally anxious about going into hospital in that situation. Yet he prayed for God’s help and sensed, quite extraordinarily, the peace of God come on him. He felt he was in God’s hands. He said on the ward he was on the other patients all looked fearful and anxious. He tried to share his Christian hope with them but they wouldn’t receive it. But for him it was wonderful knowing the peace of God at that time. Brian sadly died about six months after that hospitalization, but he died in peace knowing the presence of His saviour.

 An equally good translation of the word parakletos is ‘advocate’. An advocate stands up in court of law and explains to the judge or jury how things are from his or her client’s point of view. The advocate pleads the case. Jesus assumes that his followers will often find themselves, as he found himself, on the wrong side of official persecution.

Jesus saw the situation, as centuries of Jewish tradition had done before him, in terms of the heavenly law court with God as the judge. In that court, his people can rest assured that their case will be heard, that God will constantly be reminded of their plight, because the spirit will plead on their behalf. (Paul says much the same in Romans 8.26-27)

It will soon be exam time in our schools and universities! Here’s a story about a student called Steve who was taking a challenging class in maths. The course and teacher were known for exacting and demanding exams. The final exam was looming, and the teacher mercifully told the class that each student would be permitted to bring in a single sheet of paper with as much information as they could put on that one sheet for help during the test.

On exam day, each student came to class clutching their precious pieces of paper with as much information as possible. Some students had crammed lines and lines of font so tiny and so numerous onto that single sheet that you had to wonder how they could read it. But Steve walked in with a single blank sheet and a friend who was a senior student and who had an ‘A \*’ in maths. Steve bent down and placed that single, blank sheet of paper on the floor next to his desk. His expert friend stood on the paper.

The professor noticed the extra body in the room and asked what he was doing. Steve piped up, “You said we could bring in whatever we could fit on a single piece of paper for help on this test, well, this is my help and he can fit on the paper!”

He had followed the instructions to the letter and was the only student in that class to score an ‘A’ since he had his expert friend standing alongside him.

The Holy Spirit is like that friend, standing alongside us, supporting us, and guiding us.

Think of the Holy Spirit in this way, as a quiet, whispering teacher of the commandments of Jesus. Often the Spirit is advertised in flashier terms: The Spirit gives ecstasy; the Spirit evokes speaking in unknown tongues; the Spirit prompts dramatic and miraculous healings. Indeed, the Holy Spirit of God does perform such deeds, but these are all derivative of the one, primary activity of the Spirit -- reminding the children of God about everything that Jesus taught and commanded (John 14:26), whispering the gospel lyrics into the ears of the forgetful faithful.

Not a day goes by when I’m not sending up a prayer saying Lord, help me with this. What should I say? How should I act? What should I decide? Then be open to the prompting of the Spirit. He may speak through another person, through reading a passage from the bible, or give you a mental picture or word, or an inner feeling or conviction. It takes practice and sometimes advice from more experienced friends, but this is the promise of Jesus to give us the helper, the advocate, the counsellor.

As our Counsellor, sometimes the Spirit may also bring conviction to us about how we live our lives, maybe how we hurt others by our actions and speech – whether intended or not. The Spirit’s work will be to conform us to the image of Christ – sometimes that’s painful, but always that’s motivated out of love.

As the Spirit of truth the Spirit will give us a passion for truth and justice – God’s passion for righting the wrongs in the world. At the start of this Christian Aid week we keep our eyes open for the injustice and inequality in the world and the scapegoating by some of our politicians.

The last three verses of this section present a wonderful circle of promises that are ours because of Jesus being with us by the Spirit. We will see him, plain to the eye of faith. We will live with this new life. We will know the deepest theological knowledge of all: that he and the Father are ‘in’ each other, and that we are ‘in’ him and he ‘in’ us. And we will be joined to Jesus and the Father by an unbreakable bond of love. This, in turn, leads us back to where the sequence began. He will show himself to us.

I read something rather odd the other day: "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Whoever said that was playing with us a bit, for we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here. When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, many a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home."

The life of faith can be like that: doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that. So he told them we're tied together like branches on the vine - or like climbers tied to the rope - tied together by the Spirit, to trust in one who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd. "I will not leave you orphaned," said Jesus. "I am coming to you." I am in the Father and the Father is in me and I am in you.

We are tied together in the Spirit. Which is always difficult when some people in the church seem to be drifting away from the rest of the body because we are still in some way connected to each other through the Spirit.

One final story.

One single parent mother was trying to put her three-year-old son to bed for a nap.

When she was unsuccessful, she put him in her bed and laid down with him to encourage him to rest. She fell asleep, but he didn't. When she woke up, she saw him sitting on a chair at the end of the bed, and asked, "Luke, what are you doing?"

"I'm playing God," he replied.

"Playing God?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm watching over you while you sleep."

Children understand more than we do sometimes. God IS watching over us. Jesus gave that promise here in talking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. Not only will God watch over us but through the presence and reminder of the Holy Spirit, we will be reminded of what it means to "Love Jesus and keep his commands." And God will help us to create the environment of love, grace, faith and security that we need for our homes and our church today. Our challenge is to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, listen and trust our helper, comforter, counsellor, advocate and guide.

**HYMN: Rejoice and sing 301: Holy Spirit truth divine**

**Prayer**

*A personal prayer of thanksgiving.*

Thank you, Lord, for the…

Sorry, Lord, this feels a bit like when my mother used to make me write thank-you letters to relatives at Christmas and birthdays, when I wasn’t really sure what I was thankful for.

It’s not that your gift looks like one of those jumpers that Aunty Ruth knitted for me with a head hole I can’t fit my head through, one arm twice as long as the other and a picture of a tiger on the front!

And it’s not that your gift is like one of those unidentifiable but really useful gadgets from Uncle Bob, where the instruction book would take me three weeks solid reading to plough through.

On the contrary – your gift almost seems too simple: Helper; Advocate; Intercessor; Counsellor; Intermediary; Comforter; Spirit of Truth.

Thank you for your gift.

It’s just that…
I’m not sure what to do with it!
You said: ‘You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.’

Maybe that is the answer.
Alongside me.
Within me.
I need to let things simply be;
not overthink things;
and trust that, when the time is right,
your Spirit will show me the way
to love and care and be alongside others
in their hour of need.
You said: ‘If you love me, you will keep my commandments.’
I promise,
I will.

By the love of the oneness of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.
I promise I will accept your gift
and live out your love.
Thank you.
Amen.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord God, your Spirit of truth lives with us and in us and guides our prayers which we lift before you.

We pray for all the nations of your world.

For Sudan, where thousands of people are undertaking long, dangerous journeys in a bid to flee to neighbouring countries.

The World Food Programme are finding their resources strained under the growing number of refugees. We pray for all countries facing food shortages and famine.

We pray for Afghanistan where the hospitals lack the necessary equipment and medical supplies. Treatable conditions are proving fatal for many, particularly children.

Lord God, bring peace. Provide sustenance and healing.
Make a way for vital supplies to get through to those in need.
**We lift our prayers before you.**

We pray for the persecuted.

Throughout the world, Lord God, there are people coming to faith in you and having to worship in secret. People open their hearts to you but in doing so become prey for others to hunt, torture and kill.

North Korea is one such country, where Christians are seen as enemies of society.
If caught they and their families are sent to labour camps or executed.

Lord God, provide strength and safe keeping for all who are in danger because they worship and follow you.
**We lift our prayers before you.**

We pray for our communities.

We pray for all in our communities who give and reach out to others of all ages: in youth groups, luncheon clubs, sports activities, visiting the lonely and many, many other ways. Countless people show your love in practical ways, giving of their time, money, skills and experiences. We pray for all giving and collecting for the work of Christian Aid this week.

We pray you will guide all leaders in our communities. Be with our newly elected councillors. May all serve and make a difference for the better in our communities.

Lord God, we pray for your Spirit to guide, so that our communities will unite, see less crime and grow abundantly richer in you.
**We lift our prayers before you.**

We pray for the sick and suffering.

We pray for those sick in mind and body. Lord, this week is Mental Health Awareness week. May the stigma some still experience with mental health and behavioural health problems finally be abolished.

Lord, according to Mental Health UK there are over eight million people experiencing an anxiety disorder at any one time. But less than half of these people with generalised anxiety get treatment. Many at this moment in time are stressed, anxious about jobs and making ends meet with the spiralling costs of food and everyday bills. But for some the emotional pressure can have a detrimental effect on their physical health and impact their way of life. We pray these people will reach out for help. We pray these people will reach out to you and feel your reassuring presence.

We pray also for those who care for the sick and the vulnerable; our nurses, doctors and support workers. Our country’s GPs are under enormous pressure as their numbers fall, despite the government promising to recruit more.

We pray for pharmacists as they are given greater responsibilities to relieve the strain on surgeries and yet are struggling even now to cope with their own current workload.

Lord God, we pray for more GPs and pharmacists to be recruited and ask that you uphold those already in post.

We pray for your Spirit to guide all those in need of help to access the right treatment. Bring people into their lives who can help restore them by coming alongside,
listening and showing your healing love.
**We lift our prayers before you.**

We pray for your church.

We pray for all who minister in your name, Lord God. We pray for all called out of their comfort zones and led by your Spirit into areas unknown. There are many in our own society who still don’t know you.

May your church be guided to reach out to the lost in a way that does not water down your truth but upholds your values and shows your light of love.

May we Christians, whatever our walk in life, be witnesses to your Living Truth. For in you we live, move and exist. May we shine your light in the darkness.
**We lift our prayers before you. Amen.**

**HYMN: R & S 663 Love Divine**

**A sending out prayer**

Go in peace and the power of the Spirit,

to live in love,
to show God’s love,
to receive God’s love
– everywhere, and at all times.
Amen.