**6th August 2023**

**Call to worship**

We like plentiful resources, careful planning,
guarantees that everything will be alright.
God asks us what we already have,
invites us to give thanks,
and trustfully to share of ourselves –
and the abundance when we do is overwhelming.

**A gathering prayer**

Gracious God,
we can often feel very ordinary and inadequate,
worrying that we are not good enough.
Teach us in these moments
to treasure ourselves as your creation,
and let your hospitable love flow through us to others.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of approach**

Lord God, ‘The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.’
We gather at your feet today,
awaiting the spiritual succour you offer.
Help us to be worthy of this honour, open to receive.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of adoration**

Almighty God, you are the creator of all that sustains us.
Lord Jesus, you are the host whose hands and heart are ever
open in hospitality.
Holy Spirit, you are the unseen power that binds us in the
miracle of spiritual nurture.
**Holy Trinity of compassion and grace, we bow before you.**
**Amen.**

**Prayers of confession and assurance of forgiveness**

**A prayer of confession**

Lord Jesus,
we confess that we usually put our own needs first.
Burdened with griefs and problems,
we withdraw into ourselves.
We fail to notice that others carry burdens, too,
or selfishly fail to respond even if we do.
Yet you, Lord, are ever open to our needs.
When you walked among us in Galilee,
you knew grief for your cousin, John,
and fear for your own safety,
but still you welcomed the crowd who followed you,
healing their sick and meeting their needs of body and soul.
You set an example to your disciples
when they would have sent the people away,
and you enabled these humble, human men
to share in the miracle of your making.
We thank you for your example of self-sacrificing compassion,
and we commit to greater hospitality of spirit,
mirrored in our actions.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

The psalmist says, ‘The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.’
Father, we thank you for your saving grace.
The psalmist says, ‘The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.’
Father, we thank you for your assurance of forgiveness
when we have fallen down in our sin;
when we have failed to be open to others;
when we have neglected to show hospitality.
Thank you for never failing to be a generous host to us,
forgiving and nurturing always.
**Amen.**

**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

Lord, you are the ultimate host;
we praise you for your generosity of spirit.
Thank you for your ever-open heart and hands,
swift to forgive and to bless,
to feed our souls and to unburden our spirits.
Thank you for your nurturing nature,
enfolding us in compassion and encouragement every day.
We praise you for having all the time in the world for us,
even when we do not honour you in the same way.
Day by day, may we grow in love and grace,
learning from you, becoming more like you, we pray.
**Amen.**

**Thought for the week**

Jesus, with great love in his heart, has been teaching the crowds all day. His disciples come to him and tell Jesus he needs to send the crowd away to get food. Many in the crowd would have been the lowest paid in society – the workers not chosen by the landowner to work in the vineyard for the day, with time on their hands. They would be people who knew what it was to be hungry. Jesus says to the disciples, ‘You feed them.’ They say, ‘Don’t be ridiculous. There’s not enough. It will never work. We can’t do it’ – toxic negative emotions that sap our energy.

Do you recognise the state of mind that says, ‘There’s not enough …time …resources …energy – I’m exhausted …stuck …at the end of my tether …everything depends on me, and I have given my all’? If you look at John Reilly’s painting, Feeding the five thousand, you can see an artistic portrayal of this state of mind. On the right-hand side, the disciples are in a dark, cramped huddle, standing on each other’s toes, hands waving in despair – a sort of wailing and gnashing of teeth; a taste of hell. Remember Martha having a similar state of mind when she had a big catering project!

You might call this the human economy of scarcity: a feeling of limited resources; the end of human resource with not enough to go round; the limits of what human control can do.

In the painting, Jesus uses this as a teachable moment for his disciples. He turns this mood and the situation around. Calmly – and we might imagine with much love, compassion and understanding – he asks them what resources they already have. Five loaves and two fish is the answer, of course. Jesus – portrayed as ‘the light of the world’ – offers up the limited resources they have to God, the one who makes the crops and the fish grow, and gives thanks. It is as if Jesus channels, through his very being, the abundant feast promised by his heavenly Father. And 5000 men and women, and children besides, are fed – with basketfuls left over. This is a teachable moment: gratefully and trustfully offering what we have to God, because through us God may make ample provision to feed bodies and souls.

In the Eucharist, we offer with grateful thanks food (bread and wine) nurtured by human hands, to the God who is its source, and we discover the ‘more than enough-ness’ of God’s providential provision for us – God’s food and fellowship, shared abundantly, feeding our bodies and souls, taken into our bodies and becoming part of us, with human ego pushed right out of the way.

Now look at the Reilly painting on the left side. Do you recognise that state of mind that unexpectedly discovers that ‘there is more than enough’ to go round? You took a risk, you offered a bit of your aliveness to a situation ...your soul …something important to you – and somehow God has used you to bring in a bumper harvest, and you and those around you are fed and nurtured, body and soul

**Matthew 14:13-21**

The story of the feeding of the five thousand follows two blows to Jesus’ ministry. In his hometown of Nazareth, he faces rejection (13:57), and then comes the terrible news of Herod’s murder of John the Baptist (14:1-12). Jesus seeks to be alone, but at the same time he acts to reveal God’s power in him.

The miracle of feeding combines a tapestry of themes. Unlike the disciples, Jesus is not alarmed by the practical demands of providing food for so many. He acts in harmony with God’s will that hungry people should be fed (Psalm 22:26; 145:15-16; Isaiah 58:6-7), and he reveals his control over the basic matter of creation as the bread and fish multiply into people’s hands. His actions recall Moses providing manna in the wilderness – consistently a place of encounter with God – but his words link this sharing into the sharing of Communion: took bread, gave thanks, broke it and shared it … (14:19). This meal foreshadows the feast of God’s kingdom, where compassion enables sharing so that all are fed, and the leftovers reveal God’s generous provision over and above what is needed.

Unlike Herod, Jesus is a host who respects his guests and organizes his banquet well. The numbers are large (Matthew notes the additional ‘women and children’) and all are invited to sit down and share in an inclusive celebration of God’s provision. These guests are the crowds from the towns of Galilee, for whom hunger is normal. Again, there is a contrast with Herod’s banquet, which is only for the elite. Jesus shows God’s concern to care for everyone and honour them.  God’s kingdom is about equality and inclusion and care for all.

Those themes of equality and inclusion, the valuing of all people, is evident in the life of Martin Luther king, the Christian life I want to look at today. Throughout summer I have been sharing the lives of some amazing contemporary Christians just to remind you that God does amazing stuff through us – not all confirmed to the pages of the bible – but the Spirit is at work today – be inspired and challenged.

I was born in 1966 and my parents gave me the middle name of Martin. When I asked my mum why Martin, she said I was named after Martin Luther King. Consequently, I have always been interested in his life. I spent a portion of my recent holiday in Crete, lying in the shade and reading this newly published biography of his life, *King by Jonathon Eigg (Simon and Schuster 2023)*. It is a monumental work bringing together all we know about him and is the first work to include the recently declassified FBI Files.

Eigg starts his book on December 5th, 1955, when as he says, a young black man became one of Americas Founding Fathers. He was 26 years old and knew the role he was taking carried a potential death penalty. The place was Montgomery Alabama, former capital of Alabama slave trade.

On that day, four generations since the Civil War ended slavery – Montgomery remained the fortress of white supremacy. It weas the bastion of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members had endorsed and participated in Alabama’s 360 lynchings since the Civil War and where Black people were at risk of murder for a casual glance.

A crowd of five thousand had gathered in the Baptist church as a result of Rosa Parks being arrested for not giving up her seat on a segregated bus. As Martin Luther King prepared to speak his purpose remained unclear to the protesters. Would he urge them to stand down, as others had done, or stand up and resist?

Eig writes his voice lacked the fire of a call to arms: ‘We are here this evening for serious business’.

Until it didn’t.

*‘We are not wrong in what we are doing.*

*If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong.*

*If we are wrong the Constitution of the United States is wrong.*

*If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong!’*

It was the launch of the bus boycotts which would result in the imprisonment of Martin Luther King and many other in acts of nonviolent disobedience and resistance, but which would force Alabama to de segregate their buses. It was the start of the Civil Rights Movement with King as the figurehead.

Eigg makes the point that we have defanged King, replacing his complicated politics and philosophy with catchphrases that suit our ideology. We are selective of his famous I have a Dream speech and miss out on its cry to recognize the unspeakable horrors of police brutality or its petition for economic reparations for black people. We don’t appreciate that King was making demands, not wishes. He said we have come to the capital to cash a check. We’ve mistaken King’s nonviolence for passivity. His approach was more aggressive than anything seen in America in that he used a peaceful protest as a lever to force those in power to give up many of the privileges that they hoarded. He was one of the most brutally divisive figures in American history – attacked not only by segregationists in the South but by his own government, by more militant black activists and by white northern liberals.

Eigg says he was a man, not a saint. He chewed his fingernails. He shouted at the TV during quiz games. He hid his cigarettes from his children. He bore a scar on his chest where in 1958 surgeons extricated an ivory handled letter holder that a woman had used to stab him that had lodged beside his aorta. If he had sneezed, he would have died. As an adolescent he twice attempted suicide. As an adult he was hospitalized repeatedly for exhaustion and depression. He possessed a wicked sense of humor, improved by knowledge that certain jokes were funnier coming from a Baptist Minister. He depended on his wife Coretta immensely. He also cheated on her continually, even when he knew the FBI was tapping his phones and bugging his hotel rooms trying to destroy his reptation and marriage. Remarkably the newspaper that the FBI leaked their tapes too decided not to publish the stories out of respect for King and because they didn’t want to engage in tittle tattle. Those were the days of journalistic integrity. He maintained one intimate relationship for so long that friends referred to the woman as his second wife.

But he was a man who announced at an early age that God had called him to act. He lived his life accordingly. And he was willing to die and indeed did for what he believed.

Those closet to King saw all his flaws but understood his power grew from his ability to grapple with contradiction, to wrestle with doubt just as his biblical heroes did. ‘’great men… have not been boasters and buffoons, ‘wrote Emerson,’ but perceivers of the terror of life, and have manned themselves to face it.’

King faced it and challenged his followers to face it too. He asked his supporters to love Birmingham lawman Bull Connor and FBI Director J Edgar Hoover and others who enforced the laws and customs of white supremacy. He pushed white liberals to confront their own racist behavior, even as it cost him support. He felt despair and felt misunderstood. But when the pressure against him grew and he might have backed down, he stepped up, time after time, despite the obvious risk. He warned that materialism undermined our moral values, that nationalism threatened to crush all hope for universal brotherhood, that militarism bred cynics and distrust. He saw a moral rot at the core of American life and worried that racism had blinded people to it.

He called himself a victim of deferred dreams, of blasted hope. He also insisted that we must never lose infinite hope, that the arc of history bends towards justice.

His faith sustained him through all that and informed his action.

Here are just a few moments that struck me in reading about his life. Obviously, you can go on Wikipedia and read the timeline and see what he did. The film Selma is very accurate and moving about a key moment in the Civil Rights struggle and Martin Luther king’s role in that.

Martin Luther’s father was a Baptist Minister. They lived in Auburn Avenue in Atlanta. When he was three years old he made friends with a white boy who father owned the grocers store. They played together freely until the age of six when they went to separate segregated schools. Then the white boy told Martin Luther that it wasn’t just the start of the school that caused the separation, it was the colour of Martin Luthers skin. The boy was no longer permitted to play with black children.

For the first time he became aware of the race problem. His mother consoled him and said ‘you’re as good as anyone’. He described the experience as a formative one and he would remember and recall it many times in his ministry, the aching pain of lost friendship compounded by the new knowledge of racism. His mothers comment would shape her son’s life: why am I defined and categorized? Why am I judged?’

Childhood formative experiences. I guess we all have had them that make us the people we are today. James Farmer wrote that ‘every black child in the South has an experience of racism that shafts his soul. For the lucky , it is like a bolt of lightening striking one to his knees. For the others, a gradual dying, a sliver of meaness working its way to the heart’. How we react to life’s harshness determines our character. For Martin Luther king it made him determined to fight racism.

He was brought up in a Baptist church believing in a God of redemption, a God of judgement, a God of grace and miracles, a personal God who believed that Black people mattered no matter what racist white people said. He grew up in an urban church that blended prayer with calls to action. He grew up hearing sermons and songs that moved audiences to tears and ecstasy and called for freedom on earth as well as heaven. He said that religion is real to me and knitted to life, the two can’t be separated. The importance of church upbringings cannot be overstated in these times when church going is seen as outdated and not what normal people do. It shaped one of the great social reformers of the last century.

Late one night in January of 1956, Martin Luther King, Jr. sat by himself in the kitchen, a cup of coffee by his side, and felt the darkness of despair creeping towards him. A few weeks earlier Rosa Parks had refused to move her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King, who had just turned 27 and served as a minister at a Baptist church, was the [leader](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/leadership) of the boycott, and had received an endless stream of death threats against himself and his family. He reached a point when the forces arrayed against him seemed impossible to overcome.

As he wrote in his 1958 book *Stride Toward Freedom*:

“I was ready to give up… In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud…. At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced Him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an [inner voice](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/self-talk) saying ‘Stand up for Righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.’ Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared and I was ready to face anything.”

Three days later a bomb exploded at King’s house, thrown by unknown attackers. Luckily, he and his wife and child were unharmed. A group of his followers soon gathered at the house, armed and ready for vengeance. King spoke to the crowd and calmly defused their rage and [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/anger). He gave them a living example of how to stay true to the principle of non-violence in the most challenging circumstances imaginable.

Later, King mentioned this experience as a turning point in his life:

“Early on a sleepless morning in January 1956, rationality left me… [Then] almost out of nowhere I heard a voice that morning saying to me: ‘Preach the Gospel, stand up for the truth, stand up for righteousness.' Since that morning I can stand up without [fear](https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/fear).”

King’s nonviolent resistance campaign had been inspired by Gandhi’s campaign in India for Indian independence. Gandhi had been inspired by the teaching and life of Jesus. In 1959 Martin Luther King and his wife visited India to meet relatives of Gandhi. They then went to Jerusalem. He went to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher the traditional site for the crucifixion of Jesus. He wrote it had a captivating quality there was something that overwhelmed me, and before I knew it, I was on my knees praying… and before I knew it I was weeping. This was a great world-shaking transfiguring experience. He was so shaken that he left Coretta and walked back alone to their hotel. Jesus didn’t have to go to the cross, he thought. ‘Nobody could ever demand that he sacrifice his life in a way like this… he could have gone back on to Galilee, forgotten about the whole thing and everything would have been all right’ King later said in a sermon. ‘But Jesus felt a sense of obedience to what King called ‘unenforceable obligations’. Like King’s namesake, Martin Luther, King wrote: ‘Jesus felt compelled to follow the path of the truth no matter where it led. The cross stands as a reminder of the way Jesus lived, not merely the way he died. The cross calls us to action. The cross expresses a commitment to the faith that god would go to any length to restore a broken community. The cross promises that the whole world will one day be free and segregation will one day die. And this is the hope that can keep us going and keep us from getting frustrated as we walk along the way of life’.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered this speech in support of the striking sanitation workers at Mason Temple in Memphis, TN on April 3, 1968 — the day before he was assassinated. He used the parable of the Good Samaritan to talk about solidarity with striking sanitation workers: ‘

‘That's the question before you tonight. Not, "If I stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to all of the hours that I usually spend in my office every day and every week as a pastor?" The question is not, "If I stop to help this man in need, what will happen to me?" "If I do not stop to help the sanitation workers, what will happen to them?" That's the question.

Then he went on to say his famous mountain top speech:

‘Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.’

We give thanks for his courage and witness to a God who loves all people equally and who seeks justice for all.

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord Jesus, as we come to you now in the stillness of prayer, we are aware that you are listening. It is amazing that you can hear us individually as we pray. Thank you that you care 100% about each of us and our lives. Thank you for being a God of hospitality who loves it when we come and talk to you. Forgive us for the times when we just rush into your presence and don’t pause to listen to what you have to say to us. But we are here now. Help us to focus our full attention on you as you are focussed on us.

Lord, in the Gospel reading we heard how you were seeking solitude, but people came seeking you. In your generosity and compassion, you did not turn them away. Instead, you healed them and fed them. Help us to learn from your example. Help us never to be too busy for others, never too wrapped up in our own needs to ignore the needs of those around us.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

Lord Jesus, we think for a moment of some of the people we have met this week: our friends that we’ve spent time with; our colleagues at work; shopkeepers; health workers; anyone we’ve been with. And we remember some of the faces of those we have passed in the street or seen on the bus or train. Lord, you know the stories of each of these people. We are sorry for any occasions when we could have made ourselves more ready to spend time with them or listen and show we care but we did not.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

We think now of our plans for the week ahead.  We picture in our minds places we have planned to go and people we expect to meet. We commit our encounters, our energies, our activities to you. Help us to be accessible and present to those we spend time with. Help us to be willing to be interrupted.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

Lord, we pray for all children and teachers currently on summer holidays. We thank you for opportunities for rest and recreation. We pray for any from our congregation who are on holiday at the moment. We pray for summer camps and missions that bring the good news of your love to thousands of children. We thank you for all those who have given time and energy to work on the camps and missions and at festivals over the summer. We pray that many will come to have a deeper relationship with you because of their time away. We thank you for those who first told us about you and helped us grow in our faith.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

Lord, we pray for your world. There seems to be so much that is not how you created it to be. We are aware of global warming creating extreme weather conditions. We pray for all those affected by heat, fires, floods and famines. We pray for our governments and the decisions and hard choices they need to make between economy and climate change. Help us to do our part to slow the effects of global warming even if it is inconvenient for us. Teach us to recognise that our decisions can affect the poorest people in your world. We pray for our farmers whose crop yields are being affected by our current spell of poor weather.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

We remember places of war and unrest throughout the world. We lift Ukraine to you once again, Lord. We think of Afghanistan, the Yemen, Niger, Bangladesh and any other places we have heard about in the news. We pray for all who are suffering because of war. We pray for refugees and all those who travel to try and find a better life for themselves or their families. We pray for anyone who is a victim of trafficking and exploitation. Give us all a sense of the worth of every human being and how we are all made in your image.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

Finally, Lord, as we prepare to leave this place of encounter with you, help us to seek you out during the week. Meet us and our friends and loved ones in our places of pain and bring us your comfort. Meet us in our places of joy and laughter and help it to be infectious to all around us. Meet us in our places of stress and ease our burdens and troubles. Help us to be those who ease the strain on others too. And meet us in our times of normality, help us to find special moments alone with you or with others. Bring us back here next week ready to tell of how we have encountered you this week.

Lord, give us generosity of spirit:
**help us to recognise that everyone we meet is special.**

We ask all these things in the name of the God who rejoices in us. Thank you, Lord, for hearing our prayers. Send us out to serve you and others and to find you in all we do.
**Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

*Make sure everyone has some bread.*
God of overflowing abundance, we thank you
for the food before us, feeding our bodies and souls,
for old and new friends beside us,
for the joy of sharing,
for the flow of creativity and love when we trust you.
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Loving God,
thank you for using our small contributions.
Help us not to doubt
that each of us has something to offer,
and that, when we trustfully offer it to you,
you do amazing things for us, among us and through us –
in Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**