**3rd March 2024**

**Call to worship**

The law of God is perfect, reviving the soul

More to be desired than gold or silver

**Opening prayer**

O God, we come seeking wisdom for the way.

Plant the seed of your law in our hearts

Where it may be nourished

With the story of your faithful people

And take root in our lives.

**Prayer of confession**

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Creator God, you have outlined

Ten ways the world could flourish,

Ten ways to have full lives,

Ten ways to respect and honour the earth.

But they have become:

ten ways we’ve failed to live,

ten ways we’ve cheapened life,

ten ways we’ve abused you and others.

We admit to the failure

but we hold to your way of wisdom for the

world.

Enable us to see them as

ten ways to love each other,

ten ways to change the world,

ten ways to open up your realm.

**Assurance of pardon**

God says,

“I forgive you, not ten times,

not a hundred times,

but every time.

Live in my way and make this life better

for the world and for each other.”

**1. Introduction**

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;

**for his steadfast love endures for ever.**

Psalm 106:1

We come together as part of the family of God.

We welcome especially Aimee and Lloyd,

who have come to give thanks

for the birth of their *son Robin*,

to seek God’s blessing upon *him*,

and to dedicate themselves

to the responsibilities of parenthood.

We share in their thanksgiving.

We acknowledge the claim of this child

upon the prayers and support of this church

both now and in the years ahead.

We welcome *him* as Jesus welcomed little children;

and we affirm that it is the duty of parents

and the church together

to show the love of God in their lives,

so that in due time this child may come to confess

*his* faith in Jesus Christ and be baptized.

**2. The Word**

*One or both of the following readings are read.*

We read in the Hebrew Scriptures:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart,

and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep

these words that I am commanding you today in your

heart. Recite them to your children and talk about

them when you are at home and when you are away,

when you lie down and when you rise.

Deuteronomy 6:4-7

I was speaking last week about the story of Abraham and the family of faith. I said how I had met Justin Barrett an Oxford academic and psychologist, believes that children are born believers. They have an innate tendency to believe in God and look for purpose and meaning in the world. They ask searching questions, wonder about the meaning of life and express their own sense about what truly matters.

The research of psychologists actually suggest that being involved in a community of faith brings with it so many benefits.

Less likely to engage in risk-taking behaviours, use weapons, fighting.

Being involved in religion provides a context for: identity development, meaning, connectedness, community, being in nature, finding perspective, asking questions on difficult subjects, finding support, understanding boundaries, increased openness, better relationships, greater emotional responsivity to others, heightened sense of personal satisfaction, happiness, and positive identity formation.

Of course you can get toxic religion. But there is also good religion that is good for you.

Good religion should help you walk with God. That is one definition of spirituality – our walk with God – the search for God in response to God’s search for us.

We come to give thanks for the birth of Robin and to seek a blessing on him.

At the end of this ceremony we will sing a blessing over him using some ancient words dating back to the time of Moses. It is called the Aaronic blessing, after Aaron who was a priest and also the brother of Moses, used it to bless the Israelites as they dedicated themselves to God and God’s ways.

What does ‘blessing’ mean?

‘Bless you’ we say when someone sneezes. ‘Blessings' we may write at the end of a letter or an email. ‘God bless’, your mum or dad may have said to you as a child before you went to sleep. ‘It was a blessing in disguise’ we may say when something unpleasant turns out to be beneficial. At the end of the church service there is a blessing. What do we mean by blessing?

A blessing literally means to do good to someone.

The Aaronic blessing starts with God,

It is one of the tenets of our faith that behind all things is Someone. There is a Creator. In the mystery of creation and evolution is the mysterious Other – we are more than the sum of our parts – there is more than the world around us.

I heard about a little girl who was sitting on her grandfather’s lap as he read her a bedtime story. From time to time, she would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch his wrinkled cheek. She was alternately stroking her own cheek, then his again. Finally she spoke up, "Grandpa, did God make you?"

"Yes, Sweetheart," he answered, "God made me a long time ago."

"Oh," she paused, "Grandpa, did God make me too?"

"Yes, indeed, honey," he said, "God made you just a little while ago."

Feeling their respective faces again, she observed, "God’s getting better at it, isn’t he?"

Christians believe in a personal God who wants to bless his children. He wanted the best for them. And he wants the best for us.

The first blessing is for the Lord to “**KEEP you.”** This word basically means “to exercise great care over.” Like when you take care of and tend things such as a garden, a flock, or a house. It may involve guarding against intruders. It’s about ultimate protection.

Faith is not a magic bullet – a good luck charm. It doesn’t guarantee that nothing bad is going to happen to you. But I do believe that it makes all the difference that whatever you go through you know you are not on your own, that you are loved. Faith will ask questions in times of hardship and hold on for a blessing. I believe faith in Jesus Christ can transform sufferings and even death. Jesus said he is the resurrection and the life, that even death is not the end – that the Lord will keep us, eternally keep us. So the Lord will bless you and keep you.

One summer evening, during a violent thunderstorm, a mother was tucking her small boy into bed. She was about to turn off the light when he asked with a tremor in his voice, “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?” The mother smiled and gave him a reassuring hug. “I can’t dear,” she said, “I have to sleep with Daddy.” A long silence was broken at last by a shaken little voice saying, “The big sissy.”

Companionship makes all the difference.
Don’t be afraid the Lord your God is with you.

The second blessing is for the LORD to let his face shine upon you **and be “gracious” to you**.

When the sun shines on us we feel good. When someone we love smiles at us we feel good. Smile at a baby and the baby usually mirrors the smile back – either that or he has wind.

Sometimes we forget the power of a smile in a relationship.

A husband and a wife visited a marriage guidance counsellor. The wife complained that her husband doesn’t smile at her or say he loves her. The husband replied ‘I said I loved you on our wedding day. If I change my mind I’ll let you know’.

The counsellor was frustrated at their attitudes and decided on some shock treatment. He leant over the desk and gave the wife a passionate kiss. He turned to the husband and said ‘your wife needs that kind of attention at least four times a week’.

‘Okay’ replied the husband ‘but I can only get here on Tuesdays and Thursday!’

The smile is a sign of love. It is linked to grace. There is something unpredictably and mysteriously gracious about being loved; you know that any attractive attributes you have, counterbalanced by any unattractive features, cannot explain this love. It is undeserved, inexplicable, yet real.

Being gracious comes from the root word ‘grace’ which is all about mercy and forgiveness, especially when it’s not deserved. Christians believe that God is gracious and calls us to reflect that compassion to others.

The final third blessing is a result of the first two blessings – that you would **have peace**. When we know we are kept and secure, when we know we are loved and forgiven – hopefully it gives us peace in life.

 “Lifting up his countenance” was an expression of someone who had power and authority to look with favour on a subject. Such a person has the power to make things go well for you. More literally it means God wishes you well’ and shines his face down on you.

We all wish you well in parenthood. We wish Robin a blessed life.

**3. Thanksgiving, Dedication and Blessing**

*All stand. The minister asks the parents:*

Aimee, Lloyd Are you thankful for the gift of Robin?

**We are.**

Do you, Aimee, dedicate yourself to God?

**I do.**

Do you promise so to order your lives

that Robin will be surrounded by love and goodness?

**We do.**

Do you promise, by God’s help,

to provide a Christian home for Robin

and to bring *him* up in the faith of the Gospel

and the fellowship of the Church?

**We do.**

May the Lord bless you and give you grace

faithfully to carry out these promises;

may God grant you joy and patience, love and peace.

*To the congregation:*

On behalf of the whole Church of Jesus Christ,

we undertake to provide for the instruction of Robin

in the gospel of God’s love,

the example of Christian faith and character,

and the strong support of the family of God

in prayer and friendship.

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The LORD bless you and keep you;

the LORD make his face to shine upon you

and be gracious to you;

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you

and give you peace.

Numbers 6:24-26

**Amen.**

**4 Prayers**

God our creator, we thank you for the gift of Robin.

We thank you for the love that prepared

for *his* coming

and welcomed *him* into the world,

and we rejoice with Aimee and Lloyd in their hopes for the future.

Be with them in their home;

guide them in the upbringing of their child

and deepen their knowledge and love of Christ.

Give us grace so to live that they and their family

may find in the Christian fellowship

a source of strength and love.

God of love, we commend Robin to your care.

Give *him* health of body and mind;

and in due time draw *him* to come to you in baptism,

to make *his* own profession of faith in you,

and to commit *his* life to Christ as Saviour and Lord.

So may *he* serve you

and, at the last, share the joys of your eternal kingdom;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

**Exodus 20:1–17**

We have been looking at the covenants in the Bible as a way to understand the biblical big story. Covenants are promises made between God and humanity. Today is the big one – the Ten Commandments.

The Ten Commandments give the impression of an authoritarian God. With a command to obey orders and don’t question. Certainly many passages in the bible give that impression.

There is a joke about the ten commandments where Moses comes down the mountain and says to the Israelites I’ve got some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I’ve kept God down to just ten commandments. The bad news is that adultery is still in.

Context is important. The people of Israel are on their wilderness journey escaping from slavery and oppression in Egypt. In Exodus 19 we find them at the mountain of Sinai. The giving of the Ten Commandments becomes a sign of God’s covenant with the people of Israel. They are a practical outworking of God’s intention for God’s people to live whole and healthy lives. The intention is to establish a social rule that contrasts to life under Pharaoh so the first thing that is said is ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt out of the land of slavery’.

What they hear next in the Ten Commandments are God’s strategy for fending off a return to the pre Exodus conditions of exploitation and brutality within the community. The commandments are policies intended to create a society that practices God’s justice instead of Pharaoh’s injustice, and to establish neighbourly well-being instead of coercion, fear, and exploitation.

What policies were indispensable to prevent a return to pre Exodus exploitation? You could consider all ten of these commandments but there are three broad themes. The first three commandments assert that there is only one God, who cannot be recruited or used for any social or human agenda.

When we make what is not God God – things start to go wrong. Nationalism, materialism, success, status, are often quoted as the idols of our time. When we make what is not god God we lose perspective and we become enslaved to gods that have not got our best interest first. Money of course is the biggest idol of our time and this god causes no amount of anxiety and chaos and misery. It needs cutting down to size to ensure that it serves the interests of society and not the other way round.

The marriage of God and country in nationalism is always toxic. I read of a woman in the United States who had been brought up as a Muslim but who had become interested in Christianity because of the message of grace. But as she watched the war in Afghanistan she had come to give up on a God that blesses bombs and killing. ‘My government and your government are both doing the same thing – creating terrible violence and asking God to bless it. I want nothing to do with that god’.

The second set of commandments concern human social relationships. They seek to make human community possible by setting limits to the acquisitive capacity of members of the community – the capacity to seize and confiscate by power or cunning what is necessary to the life of the neighbour. Do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not covet, cheat, lie. These commands set limits that require each person to conduct themselves as a responsible member of the community. This is a set of limits to protect people and their property. It was designed to stop the powerful pharaohs coming along and leaving you destitute.

Thirdly special mention must be made of the fourth commandment on Sabbath where we find at the core of creation the invitation to rest. In the version in Deuteronomy (5.12-15) this command is rooted in the Exodus memory and concerns rest for the slaves. Here it is connected to the order of creation. It looks backwards and imagines God on the seventh day either spent and needing to rest, thus vulnerable, or so serenely situated in creation that God was able to be at ease.

Either way, the conduct of God on the seventh day is in sharp contrast to the world of Pharaoh, in which there is no rest but only feverish productivity. Work, work, work you slaves! The command is about respecting life and putting limits on production and consumption. It was a call to rest but also to rest in the presence of God – this is a holy day – to find your peace and security in the love of God and not in feverish activity.

Walter Brueggemann says this: ‘The ten commandments are a crucial line of defence against the destructive nihilism in the world. Nihilism, the conviction that there are no reliable values, no absolutes, results not in freedom but in the brickyard of Pharaoh where human life is completely exploitable, a deep and earthly disorder that is located not far from the ovens of Auschwitz. The God who commands knows very well what the exploitative commands of pharaoh will yield and knows as well an alternative set of commands that authorize another way in the world. And it is to these alternative commands that Israel assents.’

There is much debate and movement to remove God from our public life. A recent attempt to stop people in court from swearing their oath on the Bible ‘I promise by Almighty God to tell the truth, the whole and nothing but the truth’ was defeated, just.

Many say we don’t need God to set our laws and rules. In times of war, rules go out of the window. We live in a secular society. It is now fashionable not to believe in God. Humanity, the Bible tells us, has always been in rebellion to its creator. Humanity has always wanted to do things its own way. This is no surprise. Our society doesn’t like absolutes – it’s all a personal opinion. God is problematic. Yet realties are realities. God either does or doesn’t exist.

If god doesn’t exist then arguably the logical position is the nihilism that Brueggemann suggests. No reliable values. No sense of the ultimate value and worth of each human individual. We are all expendable. No matter how many United Nations resolutions you pass – it is only some people’s opinion. Other people will disagree.

As followers of Christ we are called to live by God’s ways and witness to these commands as a crucial line of defence against a valueless world of meaninglessness.

Let me end with a powerful story from World War II which witnesses to a different way in the world.

It concerns a church leader in Bulgaria named Metropolitan Kyril. When the Nazis rounded up the Jews in his city and herded them into a barbed wire enclosure, he decided to act. The train that was supposed to take Jews to Auschwitz pulled up at the station. The SS guards were just about to load the Jews into the box cars that would take them to the gas chambers when suddenly, out of the darkness, metropolitan Kyril appeared.

He was a tall man to start with, but as an Orthodox priest, he wore a mitre on his head, which must have made him appear like a giant as he emerged out of the darkness. He was wearing his black robes and his white beard hung over him. Marching behind him were many of the townspeople.

Kyril went to the entrance of the barbed wire enclosure, which was then surrounded by his supporters. When the Nazi guards tried to stop him, he laughed at them and pushed aside their guns. He went in among the Jews and as they surrounded him, crying hysterically, he raised his hands. He quoted one verse of scripture, and with that verse he contributed significantly to the changing of the destiny of a nation.

Quoting from the Book of Ruth he declared to his Jewish friends, ‘whither thou goest, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God’.

The Jews cheered and the Christians joined in the cheering. They were no longer separate peoples. They had become one in the declaration of the Word of God.

Because of such heroics, not a single Bulgarian Jew ever died in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II, in spite of the fact that Bulgaria was one of the Nazi powers.

In the original Hebrew language these commandments might have been ten words, a kind of shorthand for guidance handed down from generation to generation. What has been translated into English as ‘you shall not’ could also mean ‘you will not’ in the original Hebrew Text.

This opens up the possibility of seeing that one day, if all are living in a right relationship with God, there will not be murder, or stealing and so on.

In giving the Ten Commandments God invites us to choose to do things that will make the world a better place – free from exploitation and corruption the Ten Commandments can become a vision of where we are heading in Christ.

 'You shall not' comes with an authoritarian tone. ‘You will not’ suggests how through a developing relationship our personalities and lives are moulded into the purposes and ways of God.

May God lead us into being people whose ways are ways of gentleness and all our paths are peace.

*Stories from*

*W Brueggemann, The Covenanted Self, Fortress Press.*

*S. Claiborne and T Campolo, Red Letter Christians, Hodder, 2012*

**A prayer of thanksgiving**

Eternal God, we give you thanks that through the years,
through the generations, through the changing seasons,
you have been with humanity in the good, the bad and the ugly times.
We give you thanks that your truth is
unchanging, steadfast and reliable, upholding and supportive.
We give you thanks that you are there for us in all aspects of our lives
from the moment of our birth
to the drawing of our last breath and beyond.
We give you thanks that even when we seek things
and possessions more than we ought, that still you stand beside us,
walk with us, breathe with us, live within us.
We give you thanks that you are the framework,
the scaffold of our lives.
To you be all praise and glory.
**Amen.**

**Prayers of intercession**

God, who created us all,
**may we follow your guidelines and live in your love.**

God of all, we give thanks for your guidelines for our lives. We are called by you to live in your love and follow your framework. We pray that in these times of challenge and doubt, where truth is hard to find, we would always turn to you.

We pray for those who lead our nation. We ask that they would take decisions with care and wisdom, always considering your guidelines for how we can live our lives and help others. We ask for peace and calm in parliament as life-changing decisions are made that affect us all, and that, despite political differences, our MPs would put people at the centre of their thinking and voting. We look for leadership that is wise and considered and ask that the people of this nation would be served well by those we elect.

In the financial challenges that cities, towns and communities face we ask for a sense of fairness and justice, and a focus on those most in need of help and support. May we all avoid jealousy or envy, but instead give thanks for what we have and seek to be generous to others.

God, who created us all,
**may we follow your guidelines and live in your love.**

God of all, we give you thanks that you made all people and value every one of us. We are called by you to follow your guidelines in living and sharing our lives with others without greed, envy or jealousy, and to avoid conflict and seek peace.

We pray for the wars and conflicts that divide nations. We think again of the continuing war in Ukraine and the needs of all those who have suffered and are suffering. We bring to you the conflict and destructive fighting in Gaza, and the desperation of the many thousands of refugees who are left with nowhere to go. We bring to you those on all sides of these conflicts – children, the elderly, fighters and families – who continue to suffer or have lost their lives in these past few days. We pray for the United Nations, NATO, The Red Cross and Red Crescent, and other agencies and organisations that have influence, that they would continue to seek a settlement.

We remember the divisions that cause war, and we think of our own nation at this time. May those who have influence and power always consider their words carefully and avoid using language and making statements that inflame divisions between communities and faith groups. We pray for faith leaders that they would be strong in condemning any words or actions that encourage people to turn against others.

God, who created us all,
**may we follow your guidelines and live in your love.**

God of all, we thank you for our church, our community, and the many blessings you give us. We are given ways to live that make our lives better; help us to grow and thrive as followers of Jesus. We ask that we would be good servants.

We pray for the places where we spend our time. We pray for our homes, that they would be places of calm and peace where all feel safe. We pray for the schools that our young people attend and remember the staff and school leaders as they face budget challenges and huge workloads. We remember our medical centres, surgeries and hospitals and all those who support others to find help and wholeness in complex and tough situations. We think of all the workplaces that are hard for employees, and those who are desperate for work that they cannot find. Help us to support each other and our local communities as much as we can, bringing hope and truth where that is lacking.

We remember our church family and the leaders here. We pray for all those in pain, sickness and facing challenging decisions, and we think of those who are sad at the loss of those they love. For all the seen and unseen needs we all have, we ask you to walk with us through your love.

In all these prayers we know that you are God, you are our provider, and you hear us.

God, who created us all,
**may we follow your guidelines and live in your love.**

**A prayer for all ages together**

Loving God, you love each one of us
through and through and through.
We share the precious gift of life
with you, with one another
and with this beautiful planet.
Teach us your ways!
**Amen.**

**A sending out prayer**

Loving God, thank you for your gift of freedom.
Thank you also for giving us guidance
on how to be fully alive and loving.
Be with us as we put your guidance into practice,
and help us to enjoy sharing your beautiful world.
**Amen.**

Go with ten ways of wisdom for your voyage.

**No other gods**

**no images**

**no swearing**

**no overwork**

**no disrespect.**

Go with ten ways to build a new community.

**No killing**

**no adultery**

**no stealing**

**no lying**

**no jealousy.**

Go with ten ways to live the promises.