

worship notes



The Eighth Sunday after
Pentecost
31st July 2022
The Rev'd Jenny Mills

from the United Reformed Church

Call to Worship

Come, let us ring out our joy to the Eternal One; **hail the rock who saves us.** Let us come into God's presence, giving thanks; **let us hail the rock of our salvation with a song of praise.** A mighty God is the Most High, a great king above all gods. In God's hands are the depths of the earth; **the heights of the mountains belong to God.** To God belongs the sea, made before time began; **to God belongs the dry land shaped by God's own mighty hands.** O come; let us bow and bend low. **Let us kneel before the God who made us,** for the Most High is our God and we the people of God's pasture, **the flock that is led by God's hand.**

From the Grail version of Psalm 95

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness

Loving God,
as we sit here and try to let go of some of the anxieties we have
and focus our minds and still our thoughts,
we come in grateful thanks for your love in our lives
and for your presence within, around, beside and beyond us.
You are more than we can ever imagine.
You are bigger than the universe and all that is,
your love is greater than anything we can even begin
to envisage and understand.
You commanded the world into being
and blessed all that you had made - every single thing.
You showed your love for us all through prophets and peoples,
words and actions, hopes and dreams.
We see glimpses of your kin-dom:
 in a gentle touch,
 a kind word,
 a symbolic handshake
 or a uniting event;
 in a relationship that affirms
 and in love given that does not expect anything in return.

In Christ you showed us how we are to live and love and be
and what your world should be about:

justice, wholeness, peace, joy, care-fullness,
challenging that which oppresses,
celebrating that which enables and builds up,
walking with those we have nothing in common with,
accepting all as fellow human being journeying on
and limiting our judgment.

And yet, even with a teacher as amazing as Jesus, we struggle;
even with prophets as blessed as Elijah, we fail to listen and respond; even with all the
evidence we can see before us and all around us,
we fail to live your way.

God who wills good for us despite our shortcomings, we are sorry.

For the times our words and actions have divided,

have been selfish, have worked against your will.

For the times our ideas have taken over and stifled
the blowings of your Spirit.

For the times when our sense of what is right and good,

successful and best have strayed from your ideal and your way.

For when what we have has become more important than who we are.

For our self-absorption and need for control.

As individuals and as members of the one common humanity,

we confess our sins, our shortcomings, our failings.

We are sorry that this world does not look as you would want
and for our part in that.

We seek your guidance to make changes –

personally, locally and globally,

so we can work more faithfully

to be bringers of your word, will and way.

SILENCE

Jesus said: Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Let us lose the anxiety, embrace the future and trust in God.

Let us turn again to Christ and commit to live love.

We wrap this all up by saying the Lord's Prayer...

A Prayer of Illumination

God our guide and goal,

may your Spirit touch our hearts

so that as we listen for your Word in Scripture,

we may open our minds to you

and find inspiration to follow you more closely.

This we pray, as your people, blessed by you,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Readings

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14, 2:18-23 / St Luke 12: 13-21

Sermon Notes

The book of Ecclesiastes is known as Qoheleth; this can be translated as 'Teacher' or 'one who speaks to an assembly'. This Teacher gives us an honest reflection on life from someone who is learned in wisdom, having been devoted to study, offering some words reflecting on life, from a position of authority.

The Gospel according to Luke is one of the Synoptic Gospels (along with Matthew and Mark). The book is based on the same outline of Jesus' ministry and contains stories that are common in all 3 Gospels, with similar emphases. Luke's writing is from the perspective of a Gentile who is a 'beloved physician' (Col 4:14) and is addressed to Theophilus (lover of God), a person of obvious standing and possibly Luke's patron. It is widely accepted that Luke-Acts was originally one text, separated due to length, both having the same intent, to offer a firm foundation for beliefs and hope in time of trial in 'an orderly account' (Luke 1:3).

These texts offer us a number of areas upon which we could focus and draw out the Word of God from them.

Wisdom - we see that in the title of the Ecclesiastes reading. It would be possible to explore what wisdom is. We understand wisdom as a noun, the ability to think and act using knowledge and experience, insight and reflection. It comes from the adjective wise. I am sure that we all hold images and understanding of people, decisions and situations that we consider wise (or not!) and so could explore what this might mean in relation to this text from Ecclesiastes (where it appears to imply that wisdom is wasted as life, ultimately, ends in death! In the book of Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a female in a variety of forms, always in positive roles, as a sort of mediator between humankind and God. We read of the Wisdom of Solomon (the hinted at, but not stated, author of Ecclesiastes). Biblical wisdom involves being faithful to God, standing firm in faith when threatened or challenged and to keep learning and acting in ways that are true to that faith.

These two texts, coming from the perspective of wisdom, offer us some options around:

'What does wisdom look like in our context?' Exploring what being wise and living wisely may involve. Where do we see wisdom and what behaviours do these texts challenge? Who do you perceive to be wise? Give opportunities for people to offer their own ideas on where they have seen people being wise. Challenge the perception that only adults can be wise and explore the judgement around wisdom and our potential prejudices on listening to each other.

‘How does the way we live affect the world around us and do our actions and words matter?’ In Ecclesiastes it speaks of life being ‘vanity’ and that what we do in our lives does not really matter. It has quite a self-centred approach to life! But where do we see a difference being made, where do we see the world being transformed? Who do we hold up as positive role models- maybe even cite key historical models and the legacy they have left?

‘How do we care for the world around us so we leave a legacy for those who come after us?’ The man in the story in Luke tore down perfectly good barns and built new ones- and yet he never benefitted from them. How do we live in harmony with the world around us, with nature and caring for creation? Is it collective wisdom to trash and plunder our planet? Explore that touching on the Ecclesiastes text about our actions not mattering- well they do as how we live will affect future generations!

Power and Privilege - Both texts touch on this. The writer of Ecclesiastes has benefitted from a good education and is learned; the Teacher has worked hard but has time to spend in reflection and contemplation (and concludes all is vanity!). The man in Luke, who speaks with Jesus, comes from a rich family (we hear how Jesus is challenged by his request to arbitrate on a family inheritance) and in the story Jesus speaks of a rich man. With money comes power. With education comes power. With privilege comes responsibility. How do we tackle these texts when, mostly, we are people of privilege? We have freedom and shelter and food and community; we have opportunities and possibilities.

How do we treat wealth in this 21st century world? Do we elevate those who are rich, educated and powerful? Do we equate money with intelligence? Do we deride those who are poor or choose alternative ways of living?

What role does education play in this world? How important is it to educate and be educated? A focus on the power of learning and the fact that education leads to a change in how we live, leads to ‘better’ life choices and brings a power all of its own. But the power it brings is less about money and privilege and more about living well in community with others. What was Jesus’ way of teaching? How did the disciples learn? How can we grow in faith and how can our being ‘educated’ in faith lead us to live differently?

What does privilege look like? We may all caricature it (and offer a predictable image of a privileged person) but if we consider life for us in this 21st century world, we are privileged. Without creating a ‘poor them’ image, offer some reflections on life for others around the world- in areas of conflict, drought, in countries where corruption is rife, for those fleeing from abuse. How do we do more than offer ‘thoughts and prayers’? How do we share our wealth? Possibly explore the idea that we start from where we find ourselves and the emphasis and importance that we put on what we ‘have’ and our own self-importance?

An Affirmation of Faith

We believe in God the creator,
maker of sea and sand,

of waterfall and winding pathway,
bringer of apples on trees and carrots in the ground.
Who breathed life into birds, fish, animals and insects,
who equally loves us, starfish, fir trees and slugs.

We believe in Jesus Christ,
who lived on earth to show us how to live.
Who taught love, patience, peaceful protest and compassion.
Whose way is open to all, encouraging welcome, inclusion, diversity and justice.
Who gave of himself
so that God's love may be seen, heard, felt and known in this world.

We believe in the Spirit
that blows wherever there is life.
That touches hearts and inspires minds,
that encourages creativity and dance,
laughter and uncontrollable giggles,
silly faces and simple paintings.
We trust in the Spirit to
guide, trouble, challenge, lead, enable and comfort.

We believe in God: community three in one
showing us the need for relationships, communication,
tolerance, accepting difference,
valuing each other and trusting one another.

We believe in heaven on earth, here and now.
We believe we all have a part to play
in being, bringing and celebrating the love of God,
joining in with where God is already at work.
This we do because of all we have received and all we know.
This we do as we anticipate the world finally becoming true to the vision
of ultimate peace, joy and love being the way of the world.
This we do because God is.

Prayers of Intercession

God of grace, love, peace and joy.
We come to you now with our hearts heavy when we look at the mess we are making of
your world. We see sadness and pain, hurt and damaging relationships, selfish people
with power that threatens to become dangerous and dangerous people desiring power
that threatens our world. We see things that make us fearful and concerned and make
us think that life will never be the same again; we also see things that are happening
that threaten the very existence of our planet and so few people are taking notice and it
feels like nothing is being done to address them.

And yet with all this, plus our own concerns, worries, lives and situations, we come to worship and hear 'Do not be afraid...I have called you by your name, you are mine'. This goes against all the terror, anguish, pain and greed we see around us. Do not be afraid. So often we hear this from people throughout the Bible and yet our first response when things get tough is to worry and be fearful and try to control and manage things. We know your way goes against the ways of the world. That you turn around expectations and surprise, excite, amaze and confuse us even when we know what can happen.

You have shown us your desire for the world, you have promised us more than we can ever imagine, you have shown us a different way to be. So we come, stilling our hearts, holding our fears before you and seeking your way.

We hold before you a broken and hurting world, people fearful and anxious, a world of hunger and pain, a world of grief and anger, a world where conflict abounds, with twisted ideologies and misguided beliefs, a world where leaders appear more concerned about serving their own interests than those of the people they are called to represent and be serving. This is your world, damaged and destroyed by us, corrupted and claimed by us.

But we know this is not the end, this is not how you intend it to be and so we pray for this world, in its diversity and delight, its random colours and shapes, sizes and personalities and we pray for the good of your love, the blessing of your presence, the power of your Spirit, to come. Through words and actions, events, activities, protests and petitions, rallies and relationships. This we pray for all those people, places and situations that need peace, justice, equality, hope, love and light and renewal.

SILENCE.

We hold before you those people, places and situations known to us and those things that trouble us and we offer them to you in prayer. We think especially of our those for whom we have concerns and for whom we care.

SILENCE.

Help us, in our own little ways, be bringers of hope, messengers of love and fear busters. Help us to lose the anxiety and live love. Help us to put aside material gain and focus on the best for the common good, to manage well all that we have but not to let it become our purpose in life. May our lives reflect your glory, be glimpses of your love and bring little nuggets of your kin-dom to the places we are and the people we meet. All this we pray through Jesus who knew our fallibility and showed us that you can work with us and through us, so that your kingdom may come and your will be done here on earth, as is already happening in heaven. AMEN.

God calls us to think about how we use all we have. So, we come as people of faith, bringers of God's kin-dom, called to share with others that which we have received. Through our giving God's love can be more clearly seen, known and experienced.

Come, let us pray:

Gracious God, we are fortunate to have shelter, warmth, food and freedom.
As you give to us, so we respond, with our lives, our time, our hearts.
We offer our gifts, talents and money to be used for your purposes in your world.
May all we offer bring light and love as it is shared.
May all we offer be a force for good.
May all we offer be a blessing.
In your world, for your people, until your kingdom come. Amen.

Blessing

May God bless us with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
so that we may live deep within our hearts.

May God bless us with anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that we may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless us with tears
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection, hunger and war,
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and turn their pain to joy

And may God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in the world,
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

And the blessing of God,
who creates, redeems and sanctifies,
be upon us and all those we love,
and also on those we struggle to love,
now and forever more. Amen.

Adapted from a Franciscan source

Hymn Suggestions

Hymn	RS	StF	CH4	MP
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The love of God is broad like beach and meadow	108			
When, O Lord, our faith is tested.	343	643		
Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you	591			115
Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice	611	359		
<i>Key:</i> <i>RS = Rejoice and Sing, StF = Singing the Faith, CH4 = Church Hymnary 4, MP = Mission Praise</i>				

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