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Sunday 5th March 2023

The Second

Sunday of Lent

The Rev’d

Andy Braunston

**Call to Worship**

Listen, hear the sound of the trumpets and the song of the angels!

**The feast is ready; Jesus is here to welcome us.**

See the overladen tables, taste the peace and joy.

**The feast is ready; Jesus is here to welcome us.**

Here is food for the hungry, riches for the poor and paradise for those who follow.

**The feast is ready; Jesus is here to welcome us.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession & Forgiveness**

Long ago, Eternal Majesty, You called Abram and Sarah to follow You,

to leave their home, their family, and all that was known and secure;

we thank You for their faith.

At night, Embodied Word, Nicodemus came and spoke with You,

seeking to understand the demands You make,

yet not quite risking the commitment; we understand his reluctance.

In our time, Enlivening Spirit, You call us to leave our complacency,

to see our world as it really is,

and, through the simple things of bread and wine, You transform us.

Help us, Eternal One, to hear and respond to Your insistent call.

Forgive us when we hear but don’t follow,

when we turn our ears to other sounds;

when the silent music of Your praise is overcome with our own noise.

Forgive us when we refuse to analyse the ills of our world,

and when we use complexity as an excuse to do nothing.

Forgive us, O God, and give us time to change. Amen.

Hear, O people, good news!

Whilst we are still far off, God runs to embrace and welcome us home.

Know you are forgiven,

know you are given time to change;

know you must forgive others and find the courage to forgive yourself. Amen.

**Prayer of Illumination**

Bless with Your Spirit, O God, our flesh,

that as we hear Your voice in word –

read and proclaimed –

we may hear anew Your call to us. Amen.

**All Age Activity**

Have lots of jugs of water or bottles of water around a bowl at the front – or around the font if it’s in a convenient place. Tell the congregation you’re doing a survey for the best type of water to use for baptism. Ask what each type of water might signify:

fizzy water (Spirit filled), water from river Jordan (link with Jesus),

soapy water (cleansing) holy water (because baptism is holy)

warm water (stops crying!)

You could have lots of different types but settle on tap water because a sacrament is God taking the ordinary and using it in a special way to make people special.

*(Phil Nevard)*

**Readings**

*Genesis 12:1-4a*|*St John 3:1-17*

**Sermon Notes**

Contemporary Christians, and those of previous ages, have yearned to get back to the supposed simplicity of the Early Church – yet the Early Church it is hard to know quite what happened in the Early Church due to differences and diversity. The New Testament gives only some clues. Documents from after the New Testament period give some ideas as do some early church buildings that have been excavated.

The Church had to adapt to its contexts, make sense of how to be a disciple in a world which had very different values to those of the Kingdom. Early Christian congregations taught people to be good disciples of the Lord Jesus. People coming from Judaism knew the Law, had heard the Old Testament stories and could find from them pointers to Jesus. They already knew the moral law and what was required of a believer and so the journey into Christianity was somewhat easier. For a gentile, however, one had to disassociate oneself from pagan faith and practice. Every Roman house had statues of gods in a shrine which was kept neat and tidy with votive offerings of food and flowers. A statue of the emperor was kept there and prayers offered for, and sometimes to, the emperor were expected. If the head of the household decided new born babies could be left out in the cold to perish, or be picked up and reared for heaven knows what. Men might have lovers and Roman sexual mores were such that they shocked St Paul and other god fearing Jews. The head of the household had the power of life and death over his wife, children and slaves. New converts had to leave all this behind but still live within a pagan society.

A long process of initiation was developed. Anyone might come along to church services but the unbaptised had to leave half way through, after the Service of the Word. They’d hear readings from Scripture, prayers and a sermon, then be prayed for, blessed and dismissed. Only after two years of this could they be considered for baptism – and the church would decide if they were ready. A Church Meeting, held in the second part of Lent, might point out ways in which the candidate for baptism still lived in pagan ways and further training was required.

If the church judged that a candidate for baptism had learned enough about the new Christian lifestyle they would be baptised, often on Holy Saturday, after dark, at the main Easter Service. Separated by age and sex, the candidates would strip, kneel in a bathtub and be doused in water having affirmed the Apostles’ Creed in a series of three questions and answers – one for each Person of the Trinity. After being baptised they’d be clothed in new white robes and then be anointed by the bishop. Women deacons would baptise the women converts to preserve modesty. One was as naked as the day one was born – this was, after all, a new birth. After baptism the new members could join for the Service of the Table and receive Communion for the first time. It was quite a journey from an initial enquiry about going along to church!

Yet we see journeys in our readings today. In our snippet from Genesis we hear God call Abram to leave his country, his family, and his home to a new land – a land he didn’t even know. Much like those early converts to Christianity that had to leave all they knew, all they were comfortable with, in order to respond to the call they had heard, a restlessness in their soul that would not be satisfied until they responded, an itch that wouldn’t be scratched. Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to Jesus at night seemed puzzled by the radical commitment to start again, to be born anew, which Jesus called him to. We don’t know if Nicodemus ever made that commitment; this passage doesn’t reveal that we do now that later (in chapter 7) he insists to his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that the Jewish law required a person has a fair hearing before being judged and after Jesus’ death (in chapter 19) Nicodemus provided the embalming spices and assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the task of preparing Jesus’ body for burial. So his encounter with Jesus had changed him but, maybe, like, those later catechumens he wasn’t ready to take the final step of faith and baptism.

Of course all this makes us wonder about our initiation rites now. Often we’re so pleased that someone wants to join the church we fall over ourselves with our hospitality – we’re so grateful we stick them on a rota! After a year or so we might even ordain them an Elder. Now I’m not suggesting we return to this Early Church practice but maybe there are things we can learn from it.

First, the Earliest Christians knew how to critique their society. How good are we at critiquing our own society. It’s hard as we see things as normal; debt is as crucial to our society as slavery was to the Roman world, we’re confused about sexual ethics, our various identities which we assert are both useful and confusing – they strengthen and divide us. We see military might as the only way to provide security – and events in Ukraine make a pacifist position more difficult to sustain. We still live in economic models which always need growth and exploitation of our planet.

Secondly, conversion and baptism marked not only an inner faith, an intellectual commitment to Christ but also a radical change – symbolised not only by the affirmation of faith but by stepping from the waters of new birth as naked as the day one was born.. That change meant living differently, withdrawing from pagan worship and practice, not leaving babies to die, not beating one’s slaves, remaining faithful. More than this, however, the radical change that was expected had to be vouched for and it was expected that the church would raise concerns if someone’s conversion hadn’t progressed as it should or if the would-be convert was still stuck in old ways. We have tended to see conversion as an inner spiritual reality; we might be very interested in how the person understands, intellectually, the Christian faith but less concerned with the radical nature of the commitment – after all we might not be living radical lives ourselves!

Thirdly, Communion wasn’t a sacrament where all were welcome! Church, itself, was a place of welcome but Communion was seen as special – not so special it couldn’t be celebrated each week – but reserved to the baptised. Here the Lord fed His people. Here the simple things of bread and wine – soon divorced from the rest of the meal due to growing numbers – were given greater significance and were seen as signs which, at the very least, pointed to Christ present in their midst. This meal was only for the baptised who valued it all the more – fragments of bread were taken to the sick who were unable to join the service. We tend to see Communion as special – which is why we most often limit its celebration but we struggle to articulate why Communion is special, what does, or doesn’t happen at Communion and we wouldn’t dream of telling someone they can’t receive.

What would the Church look like if it expected its members to live without debt, have clearer sexual ethics, see our identities subsumed in Christ, be pacifist and to follow simpler sustainable economics? Would we block those joining who wouldn’t live like this?

What would our baptismal practice look like if we really expected radical commitment, a turn to Christ so complete that, in the words of the 1970s Catholic rite, the devil was rejected with all his pomp and empty promises.

What would our churches look like if we dismissed our wanna-be converts part way through the service, teaching them each week how to be disciples, blessing them on their way but reserving Communion – celebrated weekly as the focus of our worship – for those who had made the radical commitment required to be Christian?

Of course over Church history various attempts have been made to get back to these early practices. Making membership criteria more demanding always risks the elect becoming rather sanctimonious. Critiquing the world can soon become petty and focused on secondary issues. But if we are to move on from a vague understanding of mission to something where we see God is passionate about our worship, our evangelism, our service of others and our witness to the Gospel we need to take membership more seriously. We need to re-learn what it is to be radical, how to critique our society, how to work together to change it and to see, in Church Meeting, a key building block for the mutual accountability that is needed.

We may not dismiss the unbaptised before communion, we may not name the sins of those who’d like to join, we may not insist on such radical baptismal promises but we need, and need soon, to see our world as it is, to learn to critique it, and ourselves, that we may be better signs of the Kingdom which we long to come.

**Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in God, the Ancient of Days

who designed all creation, from cosmos to crustacean,

**and who set humanity the task**

**of living in harmony with all the life that teems over mother Earth.**

We believe in God, embodied in Jesus,

born poor, exiled due to murderous powers,

preacher of the coming Kingdom, healer and teacher.

**Crucified by the religious leaders,**

**He died and was buried.**

**On the third day God raised Him on high,**

**showing that the powers, even death, are defeated.**

**He will come again.**

We believe in God, Enlivening Spirit,

who calls us to be Church,

to see our world as it really is – and to work for change.

**We know our baptism changes us,**

**and at the Lord’s Table we are fed with His own self**

**until we meet with again with Him, and all whom we love,**

**in the coming Kingdom. Amen**

**Offertory**

In the earliest Church the believers lived together, sharing their lives and their goods. As congregations sprung up over the Roman Empire believers raised money for those in trouble in other areas and learned that they had to support the work of the Church – from looking after abandoned children to helping the poor, from paying for the ministry they had to looking after the vulnerable. It’s no difference in our own day where we have to return some of what God has given us to support the ministry of the Church in its many and varied ways. Our baptism reminds us of the radical change that we’ve undergone – our bank balances often remind us of the struggle to stay radical! So we give, we give as it’s good for us and it helps to change our world. Let us pray.

Eternal God, long ago You called folk to follow you, to change their lives,

to join a radical new movement to change the world.

Bless these gifts of our love, that we return to You,

and help us to see You at work in our world, so we can join in. Amen.

**Intercessions**

Eternal One, Majesty, Word, Spirit,

we bring to You the needs of our world,

of our nations, of our church and of our own lives,

knowing You hear our prayers, give us grace and inspire us to make a difference.

O God, ancient, yet ever young,

we remember before you the places of pain in our world,

countries at war, nations in chaos, leaders usurping power,

the poor and the earth itself groaning with pain.

Bring to judgement those who do harm to Your people, Your creation;

bless with your wisdom those who work for peace.

In particular we pray for those on the move this day,

families fleeing war, terror and famine;

youngsters fleeing repression and oppression,

women seeking new lives for themselves and their children;

open our hearts, our wallets and our borders to Your bedraggled people.

*(pause)*

O God, embodied in Jesus,

flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone,

we bring to you own nations,

those who can’t afford to pay their bills,

workers no longer earning enough to live,

NHS staff fed up with claps, exhausted,

and trying to care in a system attacked by predatory elites.

Give us a new understanding, O God, of the value of universal health care,

of the solidarity and security that it brings, and eyes to see the effects of policy.

*(pause)*

O God, Fire of Love,

we pray for those preparing for baptism this Easter,

that they may see the world as it is,

clearly see what they renounce and affirm,

that the Church, ever young, will be renewed and our world changed.

Help us, in our congregation, O God,

to give a firmer witness and to live a deeper discipleship.

In a moment’s silence, O God of all compassion,

we remember those we love and worry about, and our own needs

*(longer pause)*

Accept, Loving One, all our prayers as we pray as our Saviour taught us, Our Father…

**Holy Communion**

The Lord be with you: **and also with you.**

Lift up your hearts: **we lift them to the Lord.**

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God: i**t is right to give God thanks and praise.**

It is right and good, O Most High, to give you our thanks and praise,

for you have called us to be Your Church,

to shine as a light to the nations, to embody Your love, liberty, and life.

Through the waters of baptism,

You call us to live lives worthy of our calling,

to be signs of contradiction to the values of our world,

and to encourage each other to the ways of holiness.

Around this table You meet and nurture Your people, with Your very self.

Through the mystery of this bread and wine You lift us into your presence

and so with the choirs of angels in heaven,

and with all Your creation we sing to Your praise and glory:

**Ash Grove Sanctus**

The Rev’d Michael Forster (b1946) © Kevin Mayhew Ltd 1995 Tune: The Ash Grove

**O holy, most holy,**

**the God of creation,**

**for ever exalted**

**in pow’r and great might.**

**The earth and the heavens**

**are full of your glory.**

**Hosanna, hosanna**

**and praise in the height!**

**How blessed is He**

**who is sent to redeem us,**

**who puts ev’ry fear and**

**injustice to flight;**

**who comes in the name of**

**the Lord as our saviour.**

**Hosanna, hosanna**

**and praise in the height!**

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night, in which he was betrayed,

took bread and when he had given thanks to you, O Most High,

broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying:

Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you.

Do this in remembrance of me.

The same way after supper, he took the cup

and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them and saying:

Drink this, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant,

which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.

Lord Jesus, we commemorate your death on the Cross,

we celebrate your resurrection and we await your coming.

Eternal God, let your Holy Spirit move in power over us

and over these earthly gifts of bread and wine,

that they may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ,

and that we may become one in him.

May his coming in glory find us ever watchful in prayer,

strong in truth and love, and faithful in the breaking of the bread.

Then, at last, all peoples will be free, all divisions healed,

and with your whole creation, we will sing your praise,

through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,

in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour are yours,

almighty Majesty, for ever and ever. Amen

*(adapted from the Church of South India’s*

*Shorter Form of Holy Communion)*

To prepare to fed by the Lord’s own hand we sing the Lamb of God:

**Lamb of God (Ar hyd y nos)**

Nick Fawcett © 2008 Kevin Mayhew Ltd

**Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world.**

**In Your mercy, come and heal us; Lord hear our prayer.**

**Take away our sins, forgive us, Lamb of God restore, redeem us,**

**grant us peace, Lord, in Your mercy, Lord hear our prayer.**

The gifts of God are given for God’s people.

Eat and drink in God’s presence;

rejoice in food for your souls and rest for your bodies.

The body and blood of Christ are given for you!

**Post Communion Prayer**

Having now by faith received the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ,

let us give thanks:

Merciful God of all creation,

holy Parent of all people through our Lord Jesus Christ

who united all things in His fullness,

we join Your whole creation in exultant praise of Your bountiful goodness.

You have now touched us with new life and filled us with new hope

that Your reign will come, that the hungry will be fed,

that the oppressed will be set free from evil,

that Your reconciling work will be done,

that love and faithfulness meet together,

that justice and peace will kiss each other

and the whole creation filled with your glory.

**Blessing, glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honour, power, and might,**

**be unto our God, for ever and ever. Amen**

*(from the Church of South India’s*

*Shorter Form of Holy Communion)*

**Blessing**

May the One who, through the waters of baptism,

has made you part of the Church,

sustain and strengthen your faith.

May the One who,

through loving kindness,

feeds you with His own self at His own table,

give you the grace to challenge and change our world.

May the One who, in mysterious ways,

has guided the Church throughout the ages,

guide you in your everyday discipleship.

And may the blessing of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

be with you and those whom you love,

now and always, Amen.

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| *Hymn Suggestions* | | | | |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| The Trumpets Sound, The Angels Sing |  |  | 35 | 667 |
| There’s a Quiet Understanding | 412 |  | 36 | 678 |
| You’re Calling Us and So We’re Gathering Here |  |  | 37 |  |
| Deep In the Shadows of the Past |  |  | 463 |  |
| God It Was Who Said to Abram |  |  | 464 |  |
| Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer/Jehovah | 345 | 167 | 465 | 201 |
| Beyond these Walls of Worship |  |  | 547 |  |
| I Am A New Creation |  |  | 553 | 254 |
| O God of Bethel | 71 | 268 | 475 | 907 |
| Called By Christ To Be Disciples |  |  | 660 |  |