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**Sunday 5th November 2023**

**Proper 26 | Ordinary 31**

**The Rev’d Walt Johnson**

**Introductory Note**

In looking at the Lectionary readings for this Sunday, I perceived a common thread running through them: leadership – good and bad. While today is the 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, the 5th of November is more commonly known as Bonfire, or Guy Fawkes, Night – a man who sought to bring about leadership change through violent action. Leadership is found in all kinds of human organisations and at all levels. Our churches are led by a group of elected elders; our nation is run by elected leaders. Hospitals, schools, businesses, and other entities are led by those chosen by virtue of their experience, wisdom and skill. Individuals show their ability and rise the ranks. Our opinion of leadership depends on our experience of it. Are lives enriched or worsened because of the leadership of others? And if our experience is bad, how might we respond? And if we see others suffering because of others’ poor leadership? What happens when circumstances change or when a new leader is appointed? How do we fare if the leader is ineffective or worse? As Christians in the Church, we look to our Lord, Jesus Christ, as the exemplar leader.

**Call to Worship**

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

**God’s steadfast love endures forever!**

From the East and West, from the North and the South, we come.

**And the Lord has saved us.**

In our times of need, we have cried to the Lord.

**And God has led us out of our distress.**

Wonderful are the Lord’s works to humankind.

**Let us tell of God’s deeds with songs of joy.**

Let us call on the name of the Lord, our God:

**Who was, who is, and who is to come.**

*based on Psalm 107*

**Prayer of Approach**

Creator God, we come to come You today as we are.

We give You thanks for the freedom we enjoy to worship You.

We remember our brothers and sisters in Christ who must worship You in secret.

We come with joy and sadness in our hearts.

We come with our strength and our weakness.

We come with our health and our illness.

We offer this time to you today:

to bring to You the burdens of our hearts and minds;

to raise our voices and our souls in worship to You;

to hear Your word –

that we might be strengthened and renewed in the days ahead.

You lead us in Your truth

in the perfect example of Your love in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Help us by your Spirit to worship You. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession**

There are times when we have all failed to love others, failed to love God, and we have even failed to love ourselves. We bring these now to God. Listen for the Words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

*Short period of silence*

**Lord God, most merciful,**

**we confess that we have sinned,**

**through our own fault,**

**in thought, word and deed,**

**and through what we have left undone.**

**We ask to be forgiven.**

**By the power of your Spirit,**

**change us to do good,**

**help us to forgive others,**

**and keep us in Your ways**

**of righteousness and love;**

**through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*URC Worship Book, 4th Order for Communion; introduction – Walt Johnson*

**Assurance of Pardon**

Listen for the assurance of pardon as found in the Word of God, Psalm 103:

“The Lord is tender and kind. God is gracious.

The Lord is slow to get angry. God is full of love.

The Lord loves those who have respect for God’s ways.

The Lord’s love is as high as the heavens are above the earth.

God has removed our sins from us.

The Lord has removed them as far as the east is from the west.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord Jesus, You who are the Word made flesh:

You say to us: “One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes the mouth of God.”

Lord Jesus, You say to us: “I am the bread of life.

Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,

and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”

Lord Jesus, our prayer is in the words of Your disciples at Emmaus:

“Were our hearts not burning within us while…he was opening the scriptures to us?” Amen.

**All Age Introduction**

*You may wish to adapt the following, depending on the age profile the congregation.*

Introduce the theme as ‘Leadership’ and ask the congregation to think about people they know who good leaders are. Along with that, ask them to consider why these people are considered to be good leaders. You may need to steer the congregation in terms of people they know personally (e.g. family-members, workplace colleagues, clubs/society members) and others (e.g. those in sport, politics, saints). Invite members of the congregation (maybe of differing ages) to share their thoughts. As individuals share their thoughts, try to draw out some common themes about good leaders. Then repeat the exercise with the premise – what makes for a bad leader? Next, consider what feelings we have when the leadership changes? For example, a new teacher at school, a new boss at work, a new manager of your favourite team. Why do we have these feelings? Finally, thinking about people mentioned in the Bible. Other than Jesus (too obvious an example), who are the good and bad leaders? Maybe someone might mention Joshua!

**Readings**

* **Joshua 3:7-17** [God establishes Joshua as Moses’ successor]
* **Psalm 43** [A cry to God in the face of oppression and injustice]
* **Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37** [Thanksgiving, transforming curse to blessing]
* **Micah 3:5-12** [Condemnation of corrupt, unjust leaders]
* **Matthew 23:1-12** [Jesus’ harsh condemnation of hypocritical religious leaders] – consider extending the reading to verse 14 to include Jesus’ harshest words
* **1 Thessalonians 2:9-13** [Godly leadership in the early Church]

**Sermon Notes**

*Joshua 3:7-17* **-** God establishes Joshua as Moses’ successor

* Joshua is Moses’ successor. Moses is considered by Jewish believers to be the best-ever leader. So, it was not easy for Joshua to follow in Moses’ footsteps. This passage clearly repeats one of Moses’ greatest acts. There are three strands we can draw out of this.
	+ Firstly, Moses called on God in divine action to divide the Red Sea; Joshua calls on God to divide the Jordan river.
	+ Secondly, Joshua places the Ark of the Covenant in a central role in the crossing over the Jordan river. The Ark symbolises not only God’s covenant with Israel, but it is also the symbol of God’s Law for the people.
	+ Thirdly, God commands Joshua to get 12 men, one representative for each of the 12 tribes of Israel.
* We see Divine action, sanction through the Law and representative approval of the people: together, Joshua’s position as leader is authenticated.

*Matthew 23:1-14* - Jesus’ harsh condemnation of hypocritical religious leaders

* This passage takes place as part of the teaching Jesus gave in the Temple following His triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21). This goes on for 5 chapters.
* In Matthew 22, Jesus was questioned by Pharisees and other religious leaders. At the end of the chapter, we are told that they no longer dared ask Jesus and more questions.
* We can reasonably consider that the words of this passage were spoken by Jesus to the crowd and His disciples as they sat in the Temple. Given the location, it is likely that the Pharisees and other leaders were not too far away and in earshot!
* Jesus’ words are harsh. As we might have expected, Jesus’ words were not directed at the Romans or their imposed rule on Judea; nor was He critical of Herod’s puppet administration. Jesus’ words of condemnation are against the religious leaders of His own people.
* The text does not mention how the crowd responded to Jesus’ words. Simple nods and noises to signal agreement? Or are Jesus’ comments about the showy nature of Pharisees sufficiently accurate in terms of political satire, that the crowd is reduced to laughter?
* Jesus offers Himself in His own words as an exemplar leader, summarised in Matthew 23:11 – “The greatest among you will be your servant.” One parallel we can mention is Jesus’ action at the Last Supper (John 13), when He washed the disciples’ feet.
* Finally, if we read on to Matthew 23:14, Jesus’ harshest words of condemnation are against those people who seek to determine whom God loves. Sadly, this is a trait in some church denominations that continues such divisive theology. This may be an opportune moment to re-emphasise the inclusive and diverse nature of the URC.

**Affirmation of Faith**

**We believe in God – the Shorthand:**

Shorthand for justice and love,

Shorthand for dignity and compassion,

Shorthand for humanity’s deep spiritual yearning,

Shorthand for courage, beauty, and extra miles.

**The Shorthand of parent-language, of creator-language:**

speaking of the divine permeating all life.

**The Shorthand of son-language:**

speaking of the intimacy of this God,

the human-being-Jesus expressing love and grace,

beyond imagining.

**The Shorthand of spirit-language:**

speaking of the on-going desire to reach for tomorrow’s day,

to be the doers of beauty and the tellers of good.

**Thanks be to God. Amen.**

*URC Worship Book (Encircled By Prayer),*

*“An Affirmation” by John Humphreys*

**Prayers of Concern**

*At the bidding, “*Lord of hope, lead us out of darkness…”,

please respond with, “**…and lead us into light.”**

Loving God, our Prince of peace:

we pray for those in the dark brutality of war and conflict.

We cry out to You for the people whose lives are broken and torn apart by violence.

We pray for those who put themselves in harm’s way to protect others.

*pause*

Lord of hope, lead us of out of darkness… **…and lead us into light.**

Son of God, your Word says to us,

You have nowhere to lay Your head.

We pray for those who no longer have a safe place to live.

We pray for refugees and asylum seekers:

for those fleeing war, for those escaping injustice and persecution.

We pray for those who stand alongside others.

*pause*

Lord of hope, lead us of out of darkness… **…and lead us into light.**

Lord Jesus, You who are the Cornerstone of the Church, we pray to you.

We pray for ever-greater unity in Your church.

We weep when we hear how some who claim to speak in Your name

deny Your love to others.

We pray for our United Reformed Church.

We give thanks for and ask your blessing on those taking the first steps in faith…

*pause*

Lord of hope, lead us of out of darkness**…and lead us into light.**

Compassionate God, we despair

when we see those whom we love are in pain – in body, mind or spirit.

We pray for wholeness.

We rejoice when they again know peace.

In a moment of silence, we pray for those known to us….

*longer pause*

Lord of hope, lead us of out of darkness… **…and lead us into light.**

Blessed Saviour, we pray for ourselves…

*longer pause*

Lord of hope, lead us of out of darkness… **…and lead us into light.**

We bring all our prayers together,

as we say the prayer Jesus taught to us say…Our Father…

**Blessing**

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.”
May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.
May the Lord turn His smile towards you and give you peace. Amen.

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| **Hymn Suggestions** |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You | 474 | 694 | 611 | 1261 |
| For The Fruits Of All Creation | 42 | 231 | 124 | 153 |
| From Heaven You Came (The Servant King) | 522 | 374 | 272 | 162 |
| I Danced In The Morning (Lord of the Dance) | 195 | 404 | 247 |  |
| In My Life, Lord, Be Glorified | 375 |  |  | 335 |
| Let Us Talents And Tongues Employ | 453 | 673 |  |  |
| Longing For Light (Christ Be Our Light) |  | 543 | 706 | 1201 |
| Moses, I Know You’re The Man | 547 |  | 473 |  |
| Take My Life And Let It Be | 371 | 502 | 566 | 624 |
| When I Survey The Wondrous Cross | 217 | 392 | 287 | 755 |
| When We Are Living |  | 726 | 485 |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |  |

RS – *Rejoice & Sing* | CH4 – *Church Hymnary 4* | StF – *Singing the Faith* | MP – *Mission Praise*

You may also like to learn the hymn **Build Your Kingdom Here** by the Northern Irish based Rend Collective.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbdJXKqVgtg&ab_channel=RendCollective>

Alan Gaunt’s *The True Church Is Found Where God’s Purpose is Sovereign* is set to the tune The Streets of Loredo aka The Bard of Armagh. You will need a One Licence to reprint the words, below.

*The True Church Is Found Where God’s Purpose is Sovereign*

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Tune: Streets of Laredo; Metre: 6.6.6.5.D

1: The true Church is found where
God’s purpose is sovereign,
where people acknowledge
God’s will as supreme;
each under God’s gov’nance,
trusting God’s greatness,
beyond all the splendour
earth’s conquerors could dream!

2: The true Church is found where
its preachers sincerely
with true hearts and minds
are proclaiming God’s word;
where people are hearing
and truly responding,
and yearning to live in
the truth they have heard.

3: The true Church is found where
the bread is still broken,
received by the people
at Christ’s own command,
with Christ truly present
for those who receive it,
as though it is served by
His own wounded hand.

4: The true Church is found where
God’s people acknowledge
the Crucified Christ
and submit to His call;
His chosen ones serve Him,
whose service is freedom,
and though worlds should not perish,
His Church shall not fail.

5: The true Church is found where
God’s people, united,
are joined in obedience
to Christ, in whose Name,
with love and good will they
put trust in each other,
and prove by their own love,
the love they proclaim.

6: The true is Church is found where
without condemnation,
Christ’s people love others,
and hatred is healed.
They look for the good and
seek Christ in each neighbour,
‘til Love’s hidden purpose
for all is revealed.