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# Sunday 18th June 2023

Proper 6 /Ordinary 11

The Revd Neil Thorogood

Call to Worship

As we come together in worship,

**we give thanks for this day that you have made.**

As we share in scripture and silence, song and stillness, prayer and preaching,

**be present with us wherever we find ourselves.**

Receive all that we offer.

**Renew all that we are.**

Unite us in this time of sharing,

**that we might travel on with you.**

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

We let Psalm 100 become the voice for our opening prayers:

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures for ever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.”

In your faithfulness, God of life and hope, hear our confession we pray.

We confess the words spoken and things done which have harmed us

and hurt others this week;

hasty words perhaps, unkind thoughts, acts of frustration.

We confess words never spoken and things undone

which have laid guilt upon us and left possibility incomplete;

words of kindness or challenge left unsaid,

acts of justice or generosity thought about but never acted upon.

We look beyond ourselves, and confess that your good creation

and your beautiful human family all too often are broken by sin and wrecked by evil.

Lord, forgive us.

Forgive the things we know and the things we haven’t noticed.

Lift from us the guilt we carry.

Set us free to serve you with joy and passion.

Renew, restore, begin again your good news within us. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

Jesus, you have come to save us.

Help us to hold, deep within our hearts, the truth that all can be saved,

the most lost can be found, the most broken can be mended.

We lay hold of this wonder, and let the wonder of your forgiveness renew us now.

Through the power of your Spirit at work within each one of us. Amen.

The Lord’s Prayer

Introducing our Theme for All Ages

* Invite people to think about the many ways in which invitations are given – to come to a party, to attend an event, to go on a trip, to share a meal.
* Demonstrate by writing an invitation card and sending a message on your phone (or pretending to).
* Receiving an invitation is good, especially to something we really look forward to.
* One of the things we’re thinking about today as we read the Gospel of Matthew are the ways in which God sends out invitations.
* God, we find, tends to invite in person, through the words and kindness of others. That’s what we find Jesus doing as he travels and teaches and heals and listens to people. He gets to know them and invites them to get to know him. As people do, they discover that he’s the Son of God and that it is God who wants to welcome them.
* But Jesus can’t be everywhere, so he sends out his friends to make God’s invitation bigger, to let it spread further.
* Every church in every time and place exists because God’s invitation has kept being shared by the friends and followers of Jesus.
* Now, it is our turn.
* A question might be: How am I helping to spread the invitation Jesus brings today?

Prayer for Illumination

Holy Spirit, come to us as we open the Bible.

Take these ancient words and let them live.

Take each of us as we read and as we listen.

Inspire, encourage and equip us to follow Christ.

Amen.

Notes on the Bible texts

**Genesis 18: 1-15, (21: 1-7)**

This encounter between Abraham and Sarah and three mysterious travellers is often described as one of the best examples of Hebrew narrative art. It is a rich story, filled with detail. You might want to dwell upon the details and let the congregation imagine the setting and story as it unfolds.

The strangers come from God, but Abraham and Sarah are unaware that this is so. In Hebrews 13:2 we hear an echo of this story: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.” You might explore ways in which we are entertaining God and God’s messengers without knowing it. What stories might we tell? How does God coming to us in hidden ways challenge and encourage us?

Abraham and Sarah are told things they don’t believe to be possible – that they will have a longed-for child. Sarah’s laughter and the messenger’s response might well touch nerves for us. What might God be promising that we feel can’t possibly happen? How are we tested as we journey in faith? How do the things we pray and sing and read in the Bible change the ways we look at the world around us in its potential and opportunity? How is our sense of the future shaped by a story like this one?

If you include the sequel to this story in 21: 1-7, we get the birth of Isaac and Sarah’s delighted laughter. Joy as God works in our lives can cascade to touch and bless others. That could be a theme for the sermon.

**Exodus 19: 2-8a (is the alternative Old Testament text)**

We reach a key moment in the long journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. In the midst of the wilderness of Sinai, there comes this pause at the mountain. What might it mean for us to reach such a telling moment in our own personal journeys and in the life of our congregation? What might we hope for from God? What is demanded of us by God?

The passage has God as its main speaker. God, here, initiates the covenant with the people. It is a moment of choosing; God is choosing a nation to be a light to all nations and the people need to choose if this will be who they are. In what ways have we known such calling? What examples do we see of lives that have been touched by such a calling? Think of examples of significant figures who have lived in ways that bore witness to the presence of God. But let some of the examples come closer to home: people in our own church’s story or our own lives who have born such witness. The sermon and service could celebrate them and ask what we might learn from them.

If you want to delve deeper into theology, this is a text that takes us to the doctrine of election – the idea that God chooses some and not all for special purpose. Barbara Wheeler, Director of the Center for the Study of Theological Education at Auburn Theological Seminary, New York, offers three ideas to flesh out election. It is a process woven by God through all of our lives rather than just a single moment. For the Jews, it is part of a story begun long before slavery in Egypt and running long after they reach the Promised Land. Election entails responsibility. They are called to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Election is never about some having extra privileges and status to look down upon others. It is always to a service God requires, a calling God begins. Election creates a people. God calls not just individuals, but people to become holy in community together. What might ideas like these say to the congregation you will share with?

**Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19**

The psalm opens with a note of celebration at God’s response to need. God’s faithfulness urges our faithfulness in return. There is much here to explore. How do we know of God’s faithfulness in our lives and our churches? How does it touch and change us? But notice the challenges here as well. Is there a temptation to turn faith into a transaction: we will be faithful as long as God does what we ask for and give what we want? Many pastoral conversations might revolve around the distress of unanswered prayers, the hopes that God will speak and act that go unfulfilled. Psalm 116 begins with wonderful words, but how might they also challenge our faithfulness in the face of experience? How do we continue in loving the Lord when it seems we go unheard, or those we care about go unheard?

Notice the verses the lectionary leaves out! They delve into deep suffering – the threat of death. This psalm can climb to the heights of thankfulness because it traces the depths of fear and suffering. That might be important to explore in the sermon. We live in a world where suffering is sometimes brushed aside. The psalm refuses to do so.

The psalm moves to its conclusion with rich reflections upon joining in with the worshipping community. How might this be true in your context? In what ways is worship and prayer a setting for this sort of experience amongst us? Are there things to discover here about what our worship could and should be? How do people engage with worship as celebration for prayer answered? What if prayers go unanswered, or answered in unexpected and hidden ways?

**Psalm 100 (is the alternative Psalm)**

This is one of the shortest psalms, but also one of the most beautiful. It has a tremendous sense of energy and drive. Notice the active verbs: “make;” “worship;” “know;” “enter.” There is a sense of powerful action and activity being called forth and evoked. The preacher might invite the congregation to wonder why. Why this force and movement? The answer could well be in the relationship the psalmist celebrates. It is God who is our maker; we are God’s people. What might it be for the sermon to revel in this psalm by exploring the many ways in which we are God’s people and know ourselves as such?

Another avenue well worth exploring might be to focus upon the universal nature of praise. It is that human voices and worship join in with the joyful noise of “all the earth.” This could become a sermon exploring creation and nature and what it might mean for all things to be caught up in praising the creator. It could also, then, become a sermon to delve into the climate emergency, loss of natural habitats, extinctions and plastic pollution in our seas. How does this psalm invite repentance and renewed commitment to caring for the natural world?

We might also notice the final verse with its focus upon God’s goodness, steadfast love and faithfulness across all generations. What might that signal for our congregation this day? How have we known this to be true in our own lives and those of others? What challenges this for us? How do we share it with the world?

**Romans 5: 1-8**

As in so much of Romans, Paul packs a great deal of theology into these few words! The preacher might want to focus on some threads more than others, depending upon context and situation for the sermon. We might attend to the relationship between “peace with God” which we know now, and “hope of sharing the glory of God” which seems to await us. In Christ, we know forgiveness and God’s mercy and in this we find our ultimate sense of peace. But we also believe that Christ will return and all of creation will be caught up into God’s renewal. We live between the times, blessed with peace but not yet entering into ultimate glory. This might let the sermon explore how we experience and share such peace and yet what things in us and creation still await their ultimate destiny. How do we live this now and not yet?

Another avenue might be to focus upon all that God has achieved in Christ for us. How do we experience and share that in our worship and day by day? How do we let it transform us?

This might also bring us to Paul’s reflection upon the Holy Spirit. Given that we have recently celebrated Pentecost, this might be a sermon to further explore the Spirit’s work. Paul sees us all receiving the Spirit, an important corrective to ideas that only some Christians do or that only some spiritual gifts matter. Here it is that the Spirit cements and anchors God’s love in our hearts. How might a sermon invite people to treasure and understand such experience?

There is a hard section around suffering. Some may find this a difficult text. Can we celebrate suffering? Does it do as Paul suggests and build character in us? Many might speak of suffering knocking faith to pieces instead. Perhaps a way to explore this section is to wonder at how suffering can be endured and to name examples where this has been the case. Perhaps it is the person coping with sickness who holds on to faith and trust against the odds and evidence. Perhaps it is persecuted people who continue to trust in God’s goodness and saving power in spite of all they experience. Perhaps it is the times when others have prayed when we could not.

A sermon could dwell just upon verses 6-8 which are one of Paul’s great statements of faith. How might these words ring true for us and our church? How have we known God’s love reaching us when we have done nothing to deserve it? Indeed, how has our church demonstrated this love? This might be a moment to remind ourselves of baptism. Whether infant or believer’s, every baptism rests upon this gracious love of God saving us when we cannot save ourselves.

**Matthew 9: 35-10: 8, (9-23)**

A way into this text might be to notice the verbs; they tell a powerful story. Think about how active Jesus is: went; teaching; proclaiming; curing; saw; had compassion; said; summoned; gave them authority; to cast them out; to cure; sent; go; enter; go; lost; go; proclaim; etc… A sermon could explore the tremendous sense of movement and purpose in Jesus here. He is all about “go” and that is what he calls his disciples into. How might we in our time and church be caught up in such movement and dynamism?

Notice who is receiving what. A whole range of folk are being helped by Jesus and that help continues through the disciples. What does this imply for the life and witness of those who will hear your sermon? What does it mean for you? A sermon from this text could dive deeply into mission, outreach, service, servanthood.

How important is it that the 12 get named as they do? I think it makes them real and solid people; more than mythical figures. Matthew wants his hearers to be nodding at this point, perhaps, and saying to themselves: “Oh yes, there was that one and that one and I’d forgotten that one too.” Think about how God knows our names too. How are we joined to these 12 and all who follow Jesus. Might the sermon celebrate a cloud of witnesses alive and dead who have shown us what living faith is?

There is more here about God being selective – the Gentiles and Samaritans are to be avoided. Matthew’s gospel will end with Jesus sending his followers on a global mission of evangelism. They are to go to all nations to make disciples (28: 16-20). So, Matthew is not oblivious to the world. But his telling of the story of Jesus begins with salvation coming amongst the Jews; the Son of God as a Jewish rabbi uncovering God’s realm amongst his own neighbours. There might be links to make here to the Old Testament passages this week; of God working in the context of a people and a nation and only gradually, after the resurrection letting that story reach others. But this may also invite questions about why God works this way and how Jesus understands himself and his own mission.

Affirmation of Faith

**We believe in God,**

**who shapes and creates all that is,**

**whose touch is traced in creation’s wonders.**

**We believe in Jesus Christ,**

**Son of God and risen Saviour,**

**whose heart welcomes all,**

**in whose life we find all that life can be.**

**We believe in the Holy Spirit,**

**evocative and inspiring,**

**troubling and challenging,**

**our teacher and guide.**

**We believe in the Church,**

**the Body of Christ,**

**fallible and faltering,**

**wise and welcoming,**

**our home,**

**sign of God’s love made real in community.**

**We believe in callings,**

**ours and our neighbours,**

**to be and to become the children of God,**

**to be witnesses to God’s love,**

**to be carers and workers,**

**to be allies in all that lets life flourish upon God’s good Earth.**

Prayers for the World, the Church and Ourselves

We read, Jesus, of your compassion.

The world unfolded its sadness as much as its joy as you walked your way with us.

You saw and felt the need.

You cared.

In our prayers, we join with you in your unending compassion and care.

We pray for all those trapped in situations that destroy them:

those caught up in war and the violence of abuse;

those trapped in addiction and cursed by poverty;

those lost in depression and crushed by sadness;

those broken by anger and torn by loneliness.

*[silence for our own prayers]*

We pray for those burdened by situations that snatch at life:

those who are sick and those who care for them;

those who are dying and those who mourn;

those who face unemployment and those without homes;

those facing hard choices and those longing for guidance.

*[silence for our own prayers]*

We pray for the Church and all of its witness:

for the congregations we know that have been home to us;

for those in leadership across denominations and for their wisdom;

for those whose work is often unnoticed but who build the Church;

for those sharing faith and those seeking it.

*[silence for our own prayers]*

We pray for ourselves:

for the gifts and joys that bless us;

for the longings and hopes that beckon us;

for the sadness and pain that touch us;

for the calling and gifting that inspire us.

*[silence for our own prayers]*

Jesus, in your compassion, hear us. Amen.

Offertory Prayer

God the giver of gifts,

the one whose blessing gives life and hope,

receive all that we now offer;

take and use what we can give,

that your will be done,

in Christ’s name. Amen.

Blessing

Lord, in your compassion and mercy, bless us this day.

Lord, in your authority and power, send us this day.

Lord, in your love and strength, sustain us this day.

Amen.

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| Suggested Hymns |
|  | RS | CH4 | StF | MP |
| O Breath of Life Come Sweeping Through Us | 302 | 595 | 391 | 488 |
| New Every Morning is the Love | 536 |  | 137 | 480 |
| March on, my soul, with strength | 546 |  |  |  |
| Put Thou Thy Trust in God | 550 |  |  |  |
| To Abraham and Sarah the Call of God was clear | 553 |  |  |  |
| God’s Spirit is In My Heart | 576 |  | 404 |  |
| Love Divine, All Loves Excelling | 663 | 519 | 503 | 449 |
| God your glory we have seen in your hand | 746 |  |  |  |
| Lord teach me all your ways |  | 21 |  |  |
| I the Lord of Sea and Sky |  | 251 | 663 |  |
| God of Freedom God of Justice |  | 263 |  |  |
| Son of God Eternal Saviour |  | 468 |  |  |
| Hail to the Lord’s Anointed | 127 | 474 | 228 | 204 |
| Praise the Spirit in Creation |  | 588 |  |  |
| Go in grace and make disciples |  | 682 |  |  |
| Go into the world, go into all the earth! |  | 683 |  |  |
| Lord Your Church on Earth is seeking |  |  | 410 |  |
| God it was who said to Moses |  |  | 464 |  |
| God of Justice, Saviour to all |  |  | 699 |  |

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