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**Sunday 4th**

**February 2024**

**The Fifth Sunday**

**after Epiphany**

**The Revd**

**Andy Braunston**

**Call to Worship**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The Eternal One sits above all creation and stretches the heavens out as a curtain; God brings the mighty to naught and reminds them they are as dust blown away in the storm. **We wait on the Sovereign One who shall renew our strength.**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The Most High cannot be compared to another; God has no equal. God is great in strength and mighty in power. **We wait on the Sovereign One who shall renew our strength.**

Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The Mighty one grows not faint nor weary and empowers the weak with loving kindness. **We wait on the Sovereign One who shall renew our strength.**

**Prayers of Approach, Confession and Forgiveness**

Holy and blessed Three,

we bring you our thanks and praise today,

we remember all that you have done for us and bring you our gratitude.

We praise you for our freedom to worship,

remembering it was once denied us – as it is for so many around the world.

We thank you for the ability to challenge and question the way things are,

remembering how our forebears suffered for that right - as many still suffer today.

We marvel at our freedoms to love and live,

and remember those hard won battles - knowing that many battles are still to come.

Lord Jesus, by eschewing power you brought healing and light,

but we prefer darkness and despair;

by standing on the edge of society you showed us how to see,

yet we prefer to close our eyes to suffering;

on your redeeming wing we find delight and freedom,

but we prefer the bondage of sin.

Heal and forgive us O Lord, and give us time to change.

Most Holy Spirit,

live-giving spirit of truth and love,

speed on your flight and bathe us in your loving kindness

that we accept the forgiveness you offer,

find the courage to forgive others,

and the grace to forgive ourselves. Amen!

**Prayer for Illumination**

Open our hearts and minds, O God,

that as we hear your Word read and proclaimed

we may remember your great deeds,

and be inspired to serve you in our life together as church

and in our own individual lives. Amen.

**Readings**

*Isaiah 40: 21 – 31* | *1 Corinthians 9:16-23*

**Notes on the Readings**

*Isaiah*

The writer has an assumption that faith is built on memory – memory of God’s saving actions. The writer assumes that when the collective memory of God’s actions fails so does the faith of the community. Memory failure can be acute in times of crisis and the writer ministered in the difficult times of the 6th Century before Jesus with destruction and exile generating a crisis of confidence in the Jewish people. Did God really care for them? Was God really looking out for them? Does God really control the future? (A way of asking what the sovereignty of God might mean.) These were key questions for Isaiah’s exiled people and for us now when the collective memory of God fades even as the yearning for spirituality increases. Verses 21-26 rehearse God’s power and saving acts whilst verses 28-31 continue with words of faith. Verse 27, however, has the crux of Israel’s complaint “my way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God.” It’s not so much that the Jewish people in Isaiah’s time had forgotten God but had, instead, lost their faith in God’s loving care of them. The writer’s approach was to remind the people of God’s loving kindness believing that in these memories would be found hope for the current crisis. Babylon might be an immediate threat, but God’s power and love would outlast even the might of Babylon. Just as we see God at work in creation, so God is at work in human affairs. The powers of the age are no more than stubble to be burnt or chaff to be winnowed. The people, at this time, had become overwhelmed by the crises of their age, crises that made them forget God’s grace and reliability; they’d forgotten the loving kindness of God. The faint and powerless will receive help from God’s own hand, says Isaiah, if they just depend on God and remember God’s saving works.

*Psalm 147*

Dudley Smith’s rendering of Psalm 147 is probably the best, and most familiar, contemporary sung version but it’s a free reworking of the words of the Psalm and misses out the NRSV’s line about outcasts preferring the rather more vague “wounded souls.” Like the Isaiah passage this Psalm begins and ends with God’s praise. The command to praise is intertwined with the memories of God’s saving acts – and as such is paired beautifully with the Isaiah passage. Scholars wonder if this Psalm was composed after the Exile and is, therefore, part of the national project to both remember God’s saving works and to rely again on God’s eternal sovereignty. The Psalmist combines a jolly good hymn to enrich worship with some sturdy grounded ideas about the God who bandages and mends His people. The God whom we laud is the one who gathers up the outcasts, heals the broken hearted and binds up wounds. The one who determines the number of the stars and names them all is the one who lifts up the downtrodden and casts the wicked to the ground. We might, in these days of climate emergency, no longer think that God prepares the rains (humanity has changed the weather patterns so much we can’t blame God for the floods or the droughts) but with the Psalmist we know, and hope, that God takes pleasure in those who fear Him and trust in his steadfast love.

*I Corinthians*

Paul here describes his central approach to his ministry – to proclaim the Gospel of his Lord and to attend to aspects of communal care which are the proper preserve of the Church. In the verses leading up to this passage Paul established that, even though he didn’t push his rights, he would be entitled by social and religious norms to not to have to work for a living but live from the offerings of the community. (Stipendiary ministers might raise their hackles at the idea we don’t work for a living!) Instead, Paul decided to work for a living so as not to hinder the Gospel. Paul cleverly mixes his images of being set free from sin – and his understanding of the Law – but at the same time living under the obligations of faith and fidelity to the Gospel. He was set free to serve not to live the life of a libertine. In becoming free he has become the slave of all – quite a powerful image in a world whose economic system depended on the enslavement of others. Unlike the church in Corinth Paul realised that one could be unworthy of the Gospel; unlike those early Christians, and maybe unlike us, Paul realised we have to live out the pattern of Christ who came to serve not be served.

*Weaving The Threads*

Is there a resonance with the Isaiah passage for us? In our age we have many crises – inflation may be down, but prices haven’t lowered (and still rise albeit more slowly) and many of us struggle to pay our bills. The conflict between Israel and Gaza has locked in hatred, insecurity, prejudice, and discrimination for generations to come; the catastrophe repeats itself. In America we’re faced with a resurgent group of election deniers determined to seek revenge against the institutions that protected democracy. China desires Taiwan and seems willing to use violence and coercion to gain it; in the UK many issues are raised in election years, but few are about our fundamental values as a, in theory, free union of nations. Do these crises make us, as they made the Jewish people of old, forget God and God’s sovereignty? Does the God-given desire for spirituality give the Church a way in to remind and proclaim God’s grace?

The Psalm reminds us that praise is an act of our will; sometimes a deeply subversive, difficult and painful thing to do. In the face of disaster, the Psalmist trusted in and praised God. The Psalmist balanced the praise of God with a hymn of praise with ideas deeply embedded in social justice. We can’t sing God’s praises without being grounded in the messy business of life; yet we need to resist being overwhelmed by life’s vicissitudes which can cause us to forget God’s loving kindness.

Paul brilliantly asserts his freedom – a freedom he freely gives up in order to live as “slave to all” so as not to hinder the Gospel. Attending to the weak, realising we have to live lives worthy of our calling and seeing that just as we can forget God’s deeds (as Isaiah noted) we can also leave behind the central point of being Christians whilst, at the same time, kidding ourselves we’re still church. In an era of corruption and cynicism, the Reformers held we could be sure that the true Church subsists wherever the sacraments are rightly administered, and the Word truly preached. In each of our readings today we see a concern to remember God’s deeds, to praise God and to live well remembering that God’s concern for the forsaken, the broken, the outsider and the wounded need to be embodied in our lives and loves. We remember in order to embody in our own lives and the life of our church that which we remember.

**Affirmation of Faith**

We believe in the Eternal One who has, since before time itself, guided and grieved with us in our pain, sought and saved us when we were lost, rejoiced and redeemed us from the miry pit. **Woe to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel!**

We believe in the risen Lord Jesus who became one with us, that we might learn to love and serve God and God’s people. Jesus was betrayed by one He loved, given over to unjust trial and grievous execution and all was lost. But God raised him on high, revealing love in weakness, glory in the gloom. **Woe to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel!**

We believe in the Holy Spirit, fire of God’s love, dynamo of the Church, light for our path; the One who prays within us when don’t have the words, bringer of grace through sign and symbol. **Woe to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel!**

We believe in the Church; agency of God in our world, herald of the Gospel, community of the free, imperfect sign of perfect love. A place of healing and wholeness, of love and community. **Woe to us if we do not proclaim the Gospel!**

**Intercessions**

O Most High, we forget your goodness to us, and turn our minds away from the marvels you have done. You called us in our mother’s womb, consecrated us to your service, poured love and grace upon us, moved mountains for us and keep us as the apple of your eye. We thank you for your loving kindness seen throughout our lives, especially in difficult times when your love has held us, even without us knowing.

*pause*

Bless with your love all those who find life unbearable today:

* those living in fear of war and dictator,
* those crowded in unsafe refugee camps,
* those working for peace yet being shouted down by war mongers
* those waiting for life to end

and fill us with the memory of your command to work for a better world.

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

Risen Lord Jesus, we praise you for your life of loving service, defiant proclamation and truth telling to power. Remind us of our call to resist the powers of evil that stalk our world, our responsibility to tell the truth whatever the cost and the price of love involved in carrying our crosses.

*pause*

bless with your love all those who are called to tell the truth this day:

* whistle-blowers calling out corruption in high office,
* peacemakers exposing a lust for war,
* journalists revealing threats to democracy

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

Most Holy Spirit, we praise you for the energy you give the Church, ever surprising us and calling us to new forms of life and vitality – even sometimes when we least expect it. Make us always eager to proclaim the Gospel through word and deed.

*pause*

Bless with your love those who proclaim your saving work this week:

* those who donate to and volunteer in foodbanks
* those who seek to make women’s refuges safe and healing places
* those who welcome folk into groups for addiction where, step by step, freedom is found

*pause*

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer**.

Eternal Trinity of love, in our thanks and our prayers we bring to you now those we love and worry about.

*longer pause*

We join all our prayers together as we pray as Jesus taught….

**Offertory**

We give because it’s good for us;

we give because it makes a difference;

we give as it’s a way of resisting both the love of money and the poison of consumerism;

we give because we value the causes and organisations we support.

We give to the Church because we value it,

it makes a difference in so many lives

and it’s a measure of our discipleship.

We give in many ways, in little envelopes, by standing order,

simply by popping money into the plate.

However we give, we ask God to bless our giving and our gifts.

Let’s pray:

Eternal God, we offer our thanks for your many gifts to us,

the love you shower us with,

the life we live,

those we share living with

and all the creatures with whom we dwell

and learn to be in harmony with.

Bless these gifts,

that through them we can make a difference to our world. Amen.

**Holy Communion**

God is here! **God’s Spirit is with us!**

Lift up your hearts **we lift them up to God!**

Let us give God our thanks and praise! **It is our duty and joy** **to worship God!**

Eternal God,

from the beginning of time all creation worships you,

the sun, moon, and stars dance with joy in your presence,

all your creatures praise your most holy name,

and we, your people, thank you today for Your Word.

Since the earliest times you have spoken to us;

long ago your voice rang over the waters of the deep,

and now sounds through

natural wonder, ancient story, and bold prophet.

In the fullness of time your word burst forth in Jesus

who taught us to love and to worship,

to question and to challenge.

He spoked the engines of evil in his own age,

and calls us to do the same today.

Before he was given over to torture, degradation, and death,

Jesus shared a meal with his friends, and, during that meal,

took bread, prayed the ancient blessing, and said:

Take this all of you and eat it, for this is my body

which is broken for you. Do this in memory of me.

When Supper was over, he took the cup of wine,

again prayed the ancient prayer of blessing,

gave the cup to his friends and said:

Take this all of you and drink from it, this is the cup of my blood,

the blood of the new and everlasting covenant

so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me.

Let us proclaim the central mystery of our faith:

**Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

After three days in the darkness of death

your word, O Most High, was heard again, filling Christ with new life,

confounding the powers of evil that seek to rule our world,

inspiring us to live as he lives, showing love and compassion,

and preaching the gospel of your holy love.

May your Holy Spirit come upon us,

and upon these gifts of bread and wine,

that as we show forth Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross,

by the broken bread and outpoured wine,

we may discern, as we eat and drink,

Jesus’ presence with us, risen and ascended,

giving himself for our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace.

United around this table with the whole Church, we offer ourselves anew

and rejoice in the promise of Christ’s coming in glory.

Give us, O Most High, tongues to extoll your great deeds,

hearts to respond to the preaching of Your Word,

discernment to bring rest to the weary, excitement to the jaded,

and joy to the downtrodden.

Bless us all as we remember your deeds of old,

and seek to follow you in our own age,

that as we remember we make real your love and power,

found in weakness and vulnerability,

bringing healing and light to a cold and dark world.

All this we pray through Jesus, with Jesus, in Jesus,

in the loving power of the Holy Spirit,

all honour and glory be yours, O Most High,

forever and ever, Amen!

**Post Communion Prayer**

Bless the Lord, O my soul;

**and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name!**

Bless the Lord, O my soul,

**and forget not all God’s benefits.**

Ps. 103:1-2

Loving God, we thank you that you have fed us in this sacrament,

united us with Christ,

and given us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet in your eternal realm.

Send us out in the power of your Spirit

to live and work to your praise and glory,

for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Book of Common Worship (WJKP, 1993) 76.

Blessing

May the One who holds you in the palm of Her hands

help you to remember all that God has done for you.

May the One who lived, died, and rose again for you,

help you proclaim the glorious gospel of freedom.

May the One who came upon you at baptism,

filling you with the fire of God’s love continue to inspire you to serve,

and the blessing of God Almighty,

Source, Guide, and Goal of all life,

be with you and all whom you love, now and always, Amen.

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|  | *RS* | *CH4* | *StF* | *MP* |
| Fill Your Hearts With Joy and Gladness Ps 147 |  | 103 |  | 147 |
| Thou Whose Almighty Word | 38 | 112 | 106 | 699 |
| God The Father of Creation |  | 113 |  |  |
| Womb of Life and Source of Being |  | 118 |  |  |
| Lord for the Years | 603 | 159 | 470 | 428 |
| Christ is the World’s Light | 600 |  | 346 |  |
| I Come With Joy, A Child of God | 447 | 656 | 588 |  |
| O God Our Help in Ages Past | 705 | 161 | 132 | 498 |

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