

Sunday 20 September 2020: Season of Creation

Service sheet: Circuit At Home Service



Call to worship

As we enter autumn, our thoughts turn towards Harvest. Normally we hold one Harvest Festival as a celebration for all that God has provided. This year, we are encouraged as the Christian family to unite for this worldwide celebration of prayer and action to protect our common home.

I invite you to begin your service by lighting a candle, and setting the space with other natural items that represent the agriculture or wilderness of your local ecology, and open by praying:

We gather in the name of the Triune God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the Earth and all its creatures!

Praise be to the Holy Trinity! God is sound and life, Creator of the Universe, Source of all life, whom the angels sing; wondrous Light of all mysteries known or unknown to humankind, and life that lives in all.

(Hildegard of Bingen, 13th Century)

Hymn: From all that dwell below the skies (Singing the Faith 75)

Opening prayers

Thanksgiving God – we thank You that You always listen even when our voices are less than joyful.

We thank You that You still wait for us even when we dawdle or drag our feet.

We thank You that your generosity always overflows even when we are grudging of its bounty to others
God – we thank You that You are always, and completely, Yourself and that Your love is therefore never limited by our smallness. Amen

God of challenge and change,
the stories from Your word show us
how great the gap can sometimes be
between divine and human economies.
Forgive us when we have let attachment
to our own comfort and convenience
deter us from committing to the costly transitions necessary
for the wellbeing of our planet and the flourishing of all its inhabitants.

Silence

God of compassion and concern,
the stories from Your word show us
how great the gap can sometimes be
between divine and human tenderness.
Forgive us when we have let attachment
to our own understandings of justice and righteousness
deter us from following the discomfoting paths necessary
for the wellbeing of our planet and the flourishing of all its inhabitants.

Silence

God of generosity and grace,
the stories of Your Word show us
how great the gap can sometimes be
between divine and human understanding.
Forgive us when we have let attachment
to our own sense of hierarchy and entitlement
deter us from making the difficult shifts necessary
for the wellbeing of our planet and the flourishing of all its inhabitants.

God Your compassion for our weakness
and concern for our wellbeing give us confidence
in the generosity of Your forgiveness.
Out of the liberality of Your grace
help us, as we begin again,
to grow into the courage, love, and understanding
which are the hallmarks of Your Kingdom,
and to live in ways which will help to make this world
a place where all life can flourish. Amen

(prayers taken from The Church of Scotland)

Psalm 145

I will praise your greatness, O God;
I will bless your name forever.

Every day I will praise you
and honour your name without ceasing.

God, you are great and deserve our praise;
your glory is beyond our understanding.

Each generation shall speak of your worth
and celebrate your goodness.

I will meditate on your wonderful work
and consider what you have done.

God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and constant in love.

God's goodness and compassion
are meant for all creation.

God keeps every promise,
God's ways are always gracious.

God lifts up those who are falling
and raises those bowed down.

All eyes look to you, O God,
who supplies every creature's need.

God, whose ways are just and kind,
draws near to all believers.

Our mouths will sing out praise.
God's name be blessed for ever.

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Reading: Jonah 3:10-4:11

Reflection

I have a bit of a soft spot for Jonah – he was a reluctant prophet. He ran in the opposite direction when he first knew God was calling him and that landed him in big trouble. So eventually, and I can only imagine, rather irritably, he does God's bidding. I can see him walking through those ancient streets shouting his message of doom. And then something remarkable happens. Something totally unexpected. This city of hedonism started to listen to Jonah. They believed him and they changed their ways. Their gluttony was replaced by fasting and their fine clothes abandoned for sackcloth. They know they have nothing to lose – we didn't hear verse 9, but the king says, who knows, perhaps God mind CAN be changed.

And indeed it was. We often speak of God being unchanging. Constant. The all-knowing one. And one of the things I love about this story is that here, God's mind is changed. God has made a decision and then discards it. Such is the love God has for the people. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowman Williams has suggested that the one thing we can say with any certainty about the character of God is that God is for us and he rejects the idea that God seeks to punish us.

Rather than being delighted that Nineveh has heeded his warning, Jonah is furious with God. He has known all along that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and full of steadfast love, so what was the point of putting Jonah through all that if Nineveh was going to survive anyway?

Ninevah was on a collision course to destruction. But God loves those who are messing up their world – loves them enough to throw them a lifeline they don't understand, but will grab hold of anyway. The book of Jonah speaks powerfully to the institutional inertia of our churches and

governments in the face of continuing climate emergency, and indeed, following the 'sackcloth and ashes' of lockdown.

God's capacity for forgiveness and love is endless. God's desire is to save us, not destroy us. And love always wins in the end.

God calls each one of us. Calls us into action, to save our world. Even those who are a bit on the curmudgeonly side. I can only think that Jonah was a tricky person to spend time with. Perhaps some of you will remember the TV character of Victor Meldrew, who managed to find frustration in most of life, well Jonah reminds me of him. And it gives me hope that God asks something of all of us, even those of us who far from being saintly, and say, you're mine, you're precious and I love you despite who you are and because of who you are.

Hymn: To God be the glory (Singing the Faith 94)

Reading: Exodus 16:2-15

Reflection

Unusually this week, I've chosen both of our readings from the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. When I was reading through the passages set for today, I was struck how both Jonah and the Israelites are moaning. They are grumbling despite the action God has taken. They both wish for the better days that are behind them.

But wait, weren't those Israelites held in captivity, as slaves, for generations? Are they seriously looking through the rose-tinted spectacles of nostalgia and wishing they were back in Egypt? If we were to read verse 1 of chapter 16, we would learn that they have been in the wilderness now for about six weeks. Six weeks it's taken for them to start their complaining, their questioning of authority, their discontent. They are unhappy with their new-found freedom, because it isn't the promised land they were expecting. In fact, it's jolly hard work. To be fair to them, they are genuinely suffering. They have a point. It's understandable that they are grumbling; I'm sure I'd be doing the same after six weeks of not having enough to eat.

The Israelites think they have to choose between freedom and food. They think those are their only options and right now, they choose food.

As we start to think about our Harvest season, our thoughts naturally turn to the produce of the land, the crops and variety of food in our shops or perhaps in our gardens. From an environmental point of view, we know that there is enough to go around, but still many people starve, and that certain farming methods have damaged soil fertility. Choices are still having to be made about whether we can feed the whole earth, or whether we chose something else entirely. We have the choice of clean air, or the pollutants caused by travel. We have the choices of having strawberries all year round, or only eating seasonal produce, knowing there are air miles involved in transporting out of season food to our supermarkets.

Liberation is an arduous journey. It takes effort and even sacrifice. It means taking responsibility for each other, even for those in other countries, because our choices affect them too. Our choices mean that some people are held within the bondage of poverty, if we insist on cheap food or cheap clothing. Millions of people live with food insecurity, and shamefully we have people in the UK who cannot afford to adequately feed themselves.

If we were to read on, we would hear about that bread from heaven, where instructions are given to them not to store it up. Some of the Israelites didn't listened – they chose greed and laziness, but by the next morning the bread was full of grubs and had become foul. By taking more than we need, by insisting on more than our share of the harvest, things turn rotten. It's the source of much pain and suffering, by not having enough to go around because others have more than their fair share.

So what might our two readings tell us? Well firstly, that God's people do a lot of moaning. And sometimes we might even have good cause to moan. If we to read some of the Psalms, we would find them full of complaint. Tell God – God is big enough, God can handle our anger. I truly believe that if we are to have an honest relationship with God, we shouldn't suppress how we feel, and that means doing a bit of shouting from time to time. God heard the complaint of Jonah, heard the grumblings of the Israelites, and God continues to hear us, to listen to our pain, to be concerned for our suffering.

But I also find our readings are fundamentally about God wanting the best for us. And that happens when we act together, when we pull together as a community, with attention being paid to everyone. In a moment we will be praying the Lord's Prayer. In it we pray 'Give us our daily bread.' Us. Not me. This is a collective prayer and one in which we normally recite in each other's company, but even when we are separated, it is symbolic of our unity and our care for one another.

So what can we do about any of this? Give to foodbanks – a good place to start. We are on this Christian journey of faith together, and our care for each other is crucial. And that care extends beyond the reaches of our own church communities, into our neighbourhoods and towns. But it can also extend to how we treat the earth itself, in knowledge that when we take care of our planet we are actually taking care of each other.

I invite you this week, if you're in a grumbling mood, to tell God about it. Talk to God about your own pain and suffering. And let God lead you into new possibilities of how the love and care God shows to you, to share that to others. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

We pray in thanksgiving for Mother Earth in whom all life is rooted,
Brother Sun whose energy radiates life,
Sister Water who nurtures and revives us, and co-creatures with whom we live,
and for whom we are called to till and keep this garden.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

All-powerful God, you are present in the whole universe
and in the smallest of your creatures.
You embrace with your tenderness all that exists.
Pour out upon us the power of your love,
that we may protect life and beauty.
Fill us with peace, that we may live as brothers and sisters,
harming no one.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

O God of the poor, help us to rescue the abandoned and forgotten of this Earth,
so precious in your eyes.
Bring healing to our lives, that we may protect the world
and not prey on it,
that we may sow beauty, not pollution and destruction.
Touch the hearts of those who look only
for gain at the expense of the poor and the Earth.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

Teach us to discover the worth of each thing,
to be filled with awe and contemplation,
to recognize that we are profoundly united
with every creature as we journey towards your infinite light.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

In the wake of the COVID-19 global pandemic,
hear our cries of compassion, and heal our world and all creatures.
Inspire our hearts with a holy imagination,
to rise, freed from the demands to produce and consume
to imagine a just, sustainable way of living,
where all have enough, and all may be restored.
enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

During this Season of Creation, grant us courage to observe a Sabbath for our planet.
Strengthen us with the faith to trust in your providence.
Inspire us with the creativity to share what we have been given.
Teach us to be satisfied with enough.
And as we proclaim a Jubilee for the Earth,
send Your Holy Spirit to renew the face of the ground.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world.

We thank you for being with us each day.
Encourage us, we pray, in our struggle for justice, love and peace.
Creative Spirit, enlighten our hearts and remain with your world. Amen.

(adapted from A prayer for the Earth, Pope Francis, Laudato Si)

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.

Hymn: All Creatures of our God and King (Singing the Faith 99)

Closing Prayer

You asked for my hands that you might use them for your purpose,
I gave them for a moment, then withdrew them, for the work was hard.
You asked for my mouth to speak out against injustice.
I gave you a whisper that I might not be accused.
You asked for my life that you might work through me.
I gave a small part that I might not get too involved.
Lord, forgive my calculated efforts to serve you only when it is convenient for me to do so,
only in those places where it is safe to do so,
and only in those who make it easy to do so.
Lord, forgive me, renew me, heal me, nurture me, empower me,
send me out as an instrument of your peace and justice
that I might take seriously the meaning of servant-leadership. Amen.

(Joe Seramane, Christian Aid Lifelines, South Africa)