



This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use while you are unable to attend worship in a church building. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Call to worship

Leader: Come, let us sing the Lord's praise

Children: *Why? Sometimes it feels like God has forgotten us.*

All: How long, O Lord, will you hide your face?

Leader: Come, let us remember God's faithfulness,

Children: *That's right. God has answered our prayer.*

All: We live by faith, not by feelings, So come, let us sing the Lord's praise together.

re-worship.blogspot.com

Hymn: StF 46 Everlasting God

Everlasting God
The years go by but you're unchanging
In this fragile world
You are the only firm foundation
Always loving, always true
Always merciful and good, so good

Yesterday today and forever
You are the same, you never change
Yesterday today and forever
You are faithful and we will trust in You

Uncreated One
You have no end and no beginning
Earthly power fades
But there is no end to Your kingdom
Always loving, always true
Always merciful and good, so good

Yahweh, God unchanging
Yahweh, firm foundation
Yahweh, God unchanging
Yahweh, firm foundation

Vicky Beeching ©2002 Thankyou Music

Prayer

It's another new day, and here you are again.
You come to me, sit beside me and listen.

You're the creator of everything, yet here you are, paying attention to me.

Now that I've woken up, I start to notice you
I can feel your warmth; your love is like being bathed in sunshine.

I catch glimpses of you in the smile of a stranger
And sometimes when someone takes my hand, I recognise your healing touch,
And it brings unexpected tears to my eyes.

I want more of that. More of you.
Perhaps I should do the listening for a change,
and maybe, just maybe, I'll hear your voice,
And not confuse it with my ego.

I hide myself away, but with you, there's no point.
How can you love me so much when you know what I think?
When you hear what I say?
I don't like myself very much at times.
But here I am, laid bare and sorry.

With you here, you bring out the best in me
Make me want to be a better person.
This new day is a new chance
A chance to be generous and notice you more.
To gaze rather than glimpse you
And to wrap myself up in the security of your love.
God, I'm grateful you're here with me. Amen

Reading: Esther 7: 1-6, 9-10, 9: 20-22

¹ So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. ² On the second day, as they were drinking wine, the king again said to Esther, 'What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.' ³ Then Queen Esther answered, 'If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king, let my life be given me—that is my petition—and the lives of my people—that is my request.' ⁴ For we have been sold, I and my people, to be

destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; but no enemy can compensate for this damage to the king.⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, 'Who is he, and where is he, who has presumed to do this?'⁶ Esther said, 'A foe and enemy, this wicked Haman!' Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

⁹ Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, 'Look, the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman's house, fifty cubits high.' And the king said, 'Hang him on that.'¹⁰ So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger of the king abated.

²⁰ Mordecai recorded these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far,²¹ enjoining them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same month, year by year,²² as the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor.

Hymn: StF 615 Let love be real

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go:

*As God loves us, so let us love each other,
with no demands, just open hands and space to
grow.*

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my words are
weakness,
give me your love in spite of all you know:

Let love be real, with no manipulation,

no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams and
disappointments,
give me your trust when all my failings show:
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Reflection

I wonder, when was the last time you read the story of Esther? The set reading for this Sunday is like only catching the last 15 minutes of a film. I would urge you to go home and read the whole of Esther – it's only 10 chapters, you'll do it in one sitting; it's a cracking story with fairy-tale heroes and villains, of banquets and Persian palaces. But from the lectionary, that's it for Esther – we won't hear of her again for another three years. Esther is a great character; she's strong and brave, but this tiny book in the Jewish scriptures is controversial because it never once mentions God. It talks a lot about feasting, but fails to mention worship, we hear of fasting, but not of prayer. Because of this, Martin Luther had a very dim view of it, and like the book of James, he wanted to chuck it out of the biblical canon – the process by which books were selected to be in our bible. He also wanted to get rid of Hebrews, Jude and the book of Revelation...so he was not keen with scripture which did not marry up to his theology. Says quite a lot about Martin Luther. So how can we possibly reflect on a text where there is no mention of God? After all we do not come to worship simply to be entertained with a story akin to 1001 Arabian Nights? God's name might be absent in the writing, but does that mean that God is absent? God may not speak directly in and through Esther, but does that mean that God's voice cannot be heard? I heard an interview recently with the Rev Kate Botley, you might know her as the vicar from Gogglebox, and she told of a time when someone asked her, 'When did you know for certain that God was for real?' and she replied, 'Any day now I hope', because she said that's what faith is. You live with the uncertainty, that's why it's called faith. And there are some days that for Kate, and for me, God seems absent, but she's come to trust that tomorrow will be different and the times when she knows she's in God's presence will sustain her throughout the times when she's not so sure. God's absence was something keenly felt in the Holocaust, what is now often referred to by Jews as the Shoah – Shoah is a Hebrew word meaning

Destruction, where Holocaust refers more specifically to destruction by fire. There is a well-known story told by Eli Weisel, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, of when a child is publicly hanged by the Nazi guards in front of the Jewish prisoners and they are made to watch. They stand in agony as the child struggles dying before their eyes and Weisel hears a voice behind him asking, 'Where is God? Where is he?' and another voice replies, 'Where is God? God is there, hanging on those gallows?' The Shoah is an important comparison here because a previous time when plans were made to systematically eliminate the Jews was here, in the book of Esther. They were going to be murdered by a dangerous narcissist.

I find God's absence in the book of Esther something of a metaphor for life. There are times when God seems far away, or times when I have ignored God and God hasn't seemed relevant. There's a hymn which starts, How long will my prayer seem unanswered? I'm feeling doubt, I'm losing faith. But it goes on, I believe in the sun even when it's not shining. I believe in love even when I don't feel it. I believe in God even when He is silent.

I wonder how many of us at the moment feel our prayers for the women of Afghanistan, or for the reversal of the climate emergency are going unanswered? Do we think God is silent in those agonising moments? I wonder how many are crying out, My God, my God, why are you forsaking me?

The book of Esther is full of uncertainties. Often God is not seen clearly, but does that mean God was not working through Esther? I believe God is always present; there are times we just glimpse it and other times when it's obvious God is here. We don't invite God into our spaces, into our lives, because God is already here. What we need to do is learn to recognise it, learn to acknowledge God's presence, to be attentive to God in all things and in all places. So that even in our bleakest moments when we might shout where are you God? we can reply, God is here, feeling our pain, suffering with us, holding us through all of life. Weeping with us and sharing our laughter too.

This book seems to be to encapsulate some of the key themes I see in the scriptures. Firstly, that of liberation. The Jews were not treated well, living as immigrants in a foreign land and then suddenly, the life they did have was going to be ripped away. It was up to Esther to negotiate their freedom. There is much in Esther's

character I see later reflected in Jesus; a person willing to step up at great personal cost. Someone willing to speak out. Someone who believed in those who were marginalised and who struggled with those who held power. Someone willing to give their life to bring freedom and liberation.

Esther has become something of a hero to the LGBTQ+ community; she is someone who at the beginning of the story hides her true identity when she hides her Jewishness. She does this because she is afraid of the consequences, afraid of revealing who she truly is, and when she eventually 'comes out' as a Jew it involves great personal cost. The King, her husband, could have rejected her, banished her, treated her Jewishness as a crime, and had her executed. For many LGBTQ+ people, they hide their true identity for fear of the reaction and their fear is well founded. Our first hymn was by Vicky Beeching – she is a British Anglican of the evangelical tradition who spent many years writing and performing modern worship songs. She became a big name and was booked at the big events, took her talent to America and filled stadiums of Christians eager to express worship in modern ways. And then in 2014, she came out as gay and that led to an end of her career. The bookings dried up overnight as the evangelical community failed to be able to reconcile their brand of conservative theology with the person they adored but who they now knew had been hiding identity; an identity they could not accept. Vicky's experience of 'coming out' was brave, like Esther, but unfortunately unlike Esther, she has been rejected by many Christian circles. Incredibly, she has not left the church and her faith in God remains. She now campaigns for LGBTQ+ rights both within and outside the church.

Many churches have signs saying All Are Welcome, but for Vicky Beeching, she might have been welcome, but not as she is, and to me, that is a failure to recognise God's unconditional love for us all. We are told to love and not to judge. God's job is to judge and ours is to love. To love and not ask questions about who is worthy to be loved. There are people in our community who are hiding their sexuality, who are afraid of 'coming out' and we give them good reason. Are we an exclusive club, where you can join but only if you're like us? Or are we inclusive, reflecting the extravagant, extraordinary love of God, holding the door open to anyone, especially those who feel broken and damaged. Because if

we perpetuate this fear, and add to their damage, we are not doing what Jesus told us to do; to love.

Esther lived faithfully in unfaithful times – she had limited power, she is a queen only in name and she lacks control. She has no control over who she marries, no control over her marriage. But she is brave; she speaks when she knows the rules say she shouldn't. She refuses to be silent. She speaks truth to power. There is much in this short book which is relevant to today and even though God is not spoken of directly, I see God woven through this story, speaking through Esther and Mordecai, seeking liberation and rejecting keeping identities hidden. I pray that you have found God's word for you today, speaking through this story, meeting your needs.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, we thank you for all who respond to your call to work as a result of their faith. We pray for those who are inspired to work in countries other than their own, and we call to mind the agencies they may work for: Christian Aid, Tear Fund, the Leprosy Mission and many others.

We know these places are not always safe, and we pray for the work they do in building community as well as peace-making. Holy God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We give thanks for those whose labour is prompted by love of you and of their neighbours. We pray for those who work in health care, whose healing touch brings comfort and restoration. We pray for those who look after people in residential care, who are able to see beyond disability or age. We pray for those who support families, for parents and grandparents, for social workers and support workers, bringing stability, love and nurture into the home. Holy God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We give you thanks for those whose endurance is inspired by their hope in Jesus. We pray for those who struggle through poverty,

for those whose creature comforts have been exchanged for solidarity with the poor. We pray for those experiencing discrimination or injustice, where their humanity is denied. We pray for those who are persecuted for their faith, where worship is an act of defiance and bravery, and for those who have been tortured and imprisoned, where hope is an effort and a risk. Holy God, in your mercy,
hear our prayer. Amen

Hymn: You have won my heart

In the darkness there's a light before me
And it drives away my fear
In the silence there's a voice that calls me
And it tells me You are near
In the chaos there's a hand that holds me
And will never let me go
Yes I know that You are always for me
For Your word has told me so
*I will follow You
I will walk by faith
You have brought me near
By Your unrelenting grace
I will set my mind
On the things above
You have won my heart
With Your everlasting love*

I was lost but then You came and found me
And in love You brought me home
I was dead in sin but then You raised me
I am saved by grace alone
For no height, no depth, no life, no death
No power on earth can take us from Your love
No height, no depth, no life, no death
No power on earth can take us from Your love
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Now go in peace to love and service God in all you think, speak and do

Service sheet prepared by Revd Rachel Leather