

BASINGSTOKE AND READING METHODIST CIRCUIT

Order of service

Theme: God's welcome and love knows no boundaries

Welcome and Notices: Steward

Introduction:

This week, as many children and young people begin the new school year and nature is getting ready for autumn, we too begin a new church year. Once again, we will adapt to the changes of autumn, as nights get longer, darker, and colder — likewise, we are also invited to accept God's process of transformation in our lives, both as individuals and as a church community.

In our readings today, both Jesus and James invite us to think about how outsiders are included in our journey of faith. The Syro-Phoenician woman and the deaf and mute man are both people who were outsiders in the society in which Jesus lived. But since there are no boundaries to God's love and welcome, how can we continue to grow as a flourishing and inclusive church community for all those who love God and want to follow Jesus?

Call to Worship and Gathering Prayer:

- Hear these words from Isaiah 35: 1-7a - *abridged* – {AMP} —

The God who restores and changes all things:

The wilderness and the dry land will be glad;
The desert will shout in exultation and blossom
like the autumn crocus.
It will blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.

Say to those with an anxious *and* panic-stricken heart,
“Be strong, fear not!
Indeed, your God will come and save you.
Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,
and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped.
Then the lame will leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy.

Let us pray:

Welcoming and loving God,
we your people gathered to worship you.
Sustain us with your presence,
nourish us with your word,
strengthen us in your service
and send us out into the world
to live to the glory of your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen**

The words of the hymns are on the last page of the order of service should you need them

We sing together our opening hymn: **StF 748**: Glorious things of thee are spoken, John Newton (1725-1807): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQJUrK5vh4g>

Let us offer to God our prayers of approach and adoration

All-inclusive God,
we come to you in our own individual ways.
Just like the Syrian Greek woman of Phoenicia,
who came on behalf of her daughter,
and fell at your feet and pleaded with you.
We come, just like the people of Decapolis
who pleaded for the deaf man's healing.

Ever-loving God, however we are feeling,
we come to meet you, expectant and hopeful.
Whether we are one or many,
and whatever our position in life,
you welcome us, with arms wide open –
and we worship you, Lord, our God:

All-inclusive and ever-loving God,
we offer you our praise and adoration,
with you there is no north or south,
no east or west – no borders.
You care for each one of us.
You are a miracle-working God, who heals us
wherever and whenever we need your touch –
whether in body, mind or spirit.
Awesome God, as we gaze into your loveliness,
set our hearts ablaze with love for you...

We offer too our Confession to God, and we receive God's assurance of forgiveness

Welcoming God,
forgive us for all the times
we are too quick to form opinions,
too quick to judge others.
forgive us for the times
we don't give others the benefit of the doubt;
or fail to consider what they might be going through.

Gracious God,
open our eyes to see and our ears to listen,
and give us courage to follow Jesus' example in all things:

Silence

God loves us in His Son Jesus Christ,
and welcomes all who come to him.

God is present with us and hears us,
God loves us, and forgives us
God makes us whole.

We bless you, Lord. Amen

(The opening prayers were inspired by: Roots Magazine – adapted)

Reflection – Gerard Fuller, O.M.I. Stories for All Seasons, 1996 (slightly adapted)

“The need to be listened to is great. The chaplain at a mental health hospital told of the sad case of a Greek man who spent many years in an institution, and who was thought to be beyond help. No one knew much about him, where he had come from, but all agreed he was a hopeless case. The chaplain asked the Greek Orthodox priest in the community to pay the man a visit, just to give him a chance to speak in his native language as much as for any pastoral reasons. This man had not had the chance to do this for several years.

The Greek Orthodox priest returned from the visit and asked the chaplain: “What in the world is that fellow doing there?” He is as healthy as you and I.” Bit by bit the tragic story unfolded.

This man had jumped ship several years ago in a nearby port. Speaking no English, he had gotten into some trouble, and as mistakes sometimes happen, he was locked up in a mental health institution for several years with patients who were diagnosed with schizophrenia. There he slowly learned English and began to sound like his fellow patients.

To the whole English-speaking ‘Psychiatry Team’, he sounded schizophrenic and as removed from reality as his fellow patients. The Greek Orthodox priest, however, conversed with him in Greek, the first time anyone had done that in the hospital, and the man spoke perfectly correct Greek.

The mental health hospital staff were humbled and were taught a great lesson by this experience.

Taking the time to understand others can go a long way toward healing them— and us. How can we too better learn to understand the viewpoints and feelings of others?”

Based on Mark 7:31-37

Epistle Reading: James 2:1-10, 14-17

We sing together our second hymn: StF 256: When I needed a neighbour, Sydney Carter, (1915-2004): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fExR7eOhJ00>

Gospel Reading: Mark 7:24-37

Sermon – God’s welcome and love knows no boundaries

I read the story of this very famous church. Many important people came in their finery from all over the land. The music and the choir were superb, the ordering of the service was of very high standard; everything done was to the highest degree of excellence and in the best possible taste. For a good few Sundays, a poorly dressed woman turned up at the door but was turned away for one reason or another. After a few weeks of trying to get in, the woman sat on the lower step and prayed to God, ‘Lord, why can’t I get into this church?’ The Lord replied, ‘My daughter, how do I know? I have been trying to get into this church for years.’

Many of us may choose to go to certain places or events (including church) because we feel that we fit in. The converse is also true, we choose **not** to go to certain places or events because we may feel that we don’t fit in, or we don’t feel welcome. The feeling of inclusion and welcome is one of the most basic needs of every person. This week’s readings invite us to look again at being open and inclusive with others. The Apostle James urges his readers to let faith be seen in action specifically in the treatment of the poor, while Jesus engages in conversation with a non-Jewish woman, commends her faith and heals her daughter, and then moves on to heal a deaf and mute man, all on foreign soil.

In James' case, two strangers (a rich man and a poor man) came into the worshipping community. James apparently wrote his letter to Jewish Christians scattered among the nations — for whom the regular gathering with others for corporate worship was very much important. However, James was alarmed that their faith in Jesus did not affect the ordering of their community life — i.e., they favoured rich people over poor people.

While the two healing miracles in our gospel reading may be ordinary for Jesus, the main significance in Jesus' case is that they took place on foreign soil. Ever since the feeding of the 5000, Jesus and his disciples had for the most part been skirting around the region of Galilee to avoid any trouble, and this gave Jesus an opportunity to teach his disciples privately. So, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre — a gentile city located in Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), which bordered Galilee to the NW — a journey about 30 miles from Capernaum (Jesus' hometown). At that time Phoenicia belonged administratively to Syria. It is here that Jesus encountered this Syrian Greek woman, born in Phoenicia (hence the term Syro-Phoenician).

James is inviting us to see others through God's eyes and not to judge others based on worldly standards. James' overarching message is for Christians to be doers of the Word, and not just hearers, and therefore James is picking up the previous section (chapter one) and is now illustrating in a practical way what he means by being doers of the word and not just hearers. James' illustration of false faith (James 2: 15-16), is parallel to the illustration of false love found in 1John 3:17 "How *does* God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" Just as the Apostle John calls for love in action, so also James calls for faith in action. For James, faith in Christ must transform the way we treat others regardless of their social standing.

Jesus' own vision was seemingly enlarged by his encounter with the Syrian Greek woman of Phoenicia, as by faith she grabbed hold of the promise of Israel for her daughter — and Jesus opened the door to her. At the very least, this encounter between Jesus and this woman demands that we take note of how Jesus was deeply moved by the depth of this non-Jewish woman's faith. Jesus apparently had no choice but to graciously commend her for her faith and heal her daughter.

In our all-aged reflection, we already heard how taking the time to talk to and to listen to others can go a long way toward healing them. The Greek Orthodox priest took the time to speak the man's language and to listen to his story and found out the truth about his life, which in turn liberated the man from the prison of a mental health institution. Jesus, too, took the time to speak this woman's language and was compelled by her extra-ordinary faith. Repeatedly the Gospels show Jesus interacting with those who are often considered marginal.

However, like James' audience, there is something about being an insider, comfortable in the world you live in, that can blind you to the presence of God in others whom you may consider to be outsiders. James admonishes his readers (James 2:13), to see themselves as they are seen. We cannot expect God to use one standard of judgement on us, if that is **not** the standard of judgement that we are using for others. And so, for James, faith in Jesus Christ changes the way we live out our everyday lives. Faith in God is a commitment to a changed way of life and at the same time an invitation to see others (even the outsider) through God's eyes.

Jesus' two healing miracles may have been ordinary for Jesus, but their significance is extra-ordinary, in that Mark reminds his readers of Isaiah's prophecy of the coming of God and his kingdom to the world and not just to Israel (even though the focus is on Israel). Jesus fulfilled what God promised to do (Isaiah 35:5-6) when he came to redeem his people, (*...then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf will be unstopped. Then the lame will leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute will shout for joy*). Certainly, Jesus' brief foreign mission signalled the universal scope of the gospel of God's love and grace, and, shows that God's love has no borders.

James admonishes his readers to beware of a faith that does **not** change our lives in ways that affect how we treat others. James' congregation favoured rich people over poor people — James says, God doesn't. God doesn't judge by the normal standards of human society. To live by the 'royal law of love' is to keep to the fore the dignity which faith in Christ demands of us to give to all those we encounter. For God is equally concerned about others as much as he is concerned about us!

Thanks be to God!

Let us offer our lives and gifts to God:

All-inclusive and ever-loving God, thank you that you welcome everyone, and gives healing and love to all who come to you. In return we offer to you the gifts of our lives and all that you have blessed with, including our gifts of money. Show us how to share your love, your healing, and all your good gifts with others, for the sake of your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen

We sing together our Third hymn: **StF 415**: The church of Christ in every age, Fred Prat Green (1903-2000): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zBUAQKGyc5A>

I invite you to join me in offering to God our Prayers of Thanks:

Lord, God, our healer,
thank you for hearing us and answering our prayers.
Thank you, Lord, that no one who puts their faith in you
will ever be put to shame or disappointed –
We thank you for the power of language and words
to make our petitions known to you.
We are grateful for the courage of those who have gone before us,
who bravely and willingly came to you for healing.
Lord, God, our healer,
We thank you for the power of actions
that speak louder than words.
Thank you that you are available
to all who put their trust in you...

With confidence we offer too, our Prayers of Intercession to God:

Response:

All-inclusive, welcoming God,
come, rescue, and restore us.

Loving God, who rescues us and restores us,
we think of those who need your help today.

We pray especially for those who feel ignored,
those whose problems are swept under the mat,
whose cries for help are downplayed or devalued.

All-inclusive, welcoming God,
come, rescue, and restore us.

We pray for those who feel they do not have a place to belong,
a safe place to find support and friendship.
We pray for those in situations of captivity,
in whatever sense of the word,
for those who cannot see a way through the darkness,
for those who feel their lives are in pieces.

All-inclusive, welcoming God,
come, rescue, and restore us.

In the silence, let us pray for those situations and people that made the news headlines this past week...

In the silence, we pray for those we know who need our prayers, the sick, the bereaved (and those who have died), the hurting etc., ...

We may wish to mention some of these individuals / situations aloud, as appropriate...

...We ask you, Lord, to touch their lives, that they may know you as healer and as friend.

All-inclusive, welcoming God,

come, rescue, and restore us.

Lord, as for us, make us advocates and champions for those the world has abandoned, help us to walk beside them, showing your love to all who need it.

(Prayers of thanks and Intercession adapted from: Roots Magazine)

We conclude our prayers by saying together the prayer that Jesus taught His first disciples: 'Our Father...' **Amen**

We sing together our closing hymn: StF 409: Let us build a house where love can dwell, and all can safely live, Marty Haugen (b. 1950): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9bOiAxwi4U>

Sending-out Prayer and Blessing

May the God of our salvation,
who opens the way to eternal life
touch our hearts with his love
and open our lives to his ways;
so we may learn openness to others,
offer welcome, and practise inclusion.

...and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
dwell among you and remain with you always. **Amen**

(Closing prayers adapted & inspired by Roots Magazine and David Adams, 1999)

First Hymn

Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, city of our God; he whose word cannot be broken, formed thee for his own abode; on the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose? With salvation's walls surrounded, thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

See the streams of living waters, springing from eternal love, well supply thy sons and daughters, and all fear of want remove; who can faint while such a river ever flows their thirst t'assuage? Grace, which like the Lord, the giver, never fails from age to age.

Round each habitation hov'ring, see the cloud and fire appear for a glory and a cov'ring, showing that the Lord is near; thus deriving from their banner light by night and shade by day, safe they feed upon the manna which he gives them when they pray.

Saviour, if of Zion's city I, thro' grace, a member am, let the world deride or pity, I will glory in thy name; fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show; solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know.

Second Hymn

When I needed a neighbour, Were you there, were you there? When I needed a neighbour, were you there?
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

I was hungry and thirsty, Were you there, were you there? I was hungry and thirsty, were you there?
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

I was cold, I was naked, Were you there, were you there? I was cold, I was naked, were you there?
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

When I needed a shelter Were you there, were you there? When I needed a shelter were you there?
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

When I needed a healer, Were you there, were you there? When I needed a healer, were you there?
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there. Wherever you travel, I'll be there.
*And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter,
I'll be there.*

Third Hymn

The Church of Christ in every age, Beset by change but Spirit led, Must claim and test its heritage, And keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street, The victims of injustice cry, For shelter and for bread to eat, And never live until they die.

Then let the servant Church arise, A caring Church that longs to be, A partner in

Christ's sacrifice, And clothed in Christ's humanity.

For he alone, whose blood was shed, Can cure the fever in our blood, And teach us how to share our bread, And feed the starving multitude.

We have no mission but to serve, In full obedience to our Lord: To care for all, without reserve, And to spread his liberating Word.

Fourth Hymn

Let us build a house, Where love can dwell, And all can safely live, A place where Saints and children tell, How hearts learn to forgive, Built of hopes and dreams and visions, Rock of faith and vault of grace, Here the love of Christ shall end divisions

All are welcome, all are welcome, All are welcome in this place

Let us build a house where prophets speak, And words are strong and true, Where all God's children dare to seek To dream God's reign anew, Here the cross shall stand as witness, And a symbol of God's grace, Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus

All are welcome, all are welcome, All are welcome in this place

Let us build a house where love is found, In water, wine and wheat, A banquet hall on holy ground, Where peace and justice meet, Here the love of God, through Jesus, Is revealed in time and space, As we share in Christ the feast that frees us

All are welcome, all are welcome, All are welcome in this place