

CIRCUIT SERVICE FOR SUNDAY 17th MAY 2020

As I prepared this service for today, my diary shows me that I have missed six circuit services during the period of lock down, so I welcome this opportunity to share fellowship with you during this period of isolation. (Although by the time you read this the Government may have given some details of a gradual reduction in the lock down). I trust that everyone has been keeping well, and like myself, looking forward to the day when we can worship publicly again together.

I have used two of the readings set for this Sunday, and my prayers are largely from Roots, with some minor changes to take into account the situation in which we all find ourselves. May God bless us as we continue to worship him together during these strange times.

Let us pray - Spirit of truth come close to us, unite us into the body of Christ. Enable us to worship God in Spirit and in truth. Help us to support and encourage each other at this time and help us to love as we are loved. Amen.

A Period of Silence

Let us continue in prayer – Gracious God we come before you, drawn by the power of your welcome love. We come with our sorrows and our joys. We come with our expectations and apprehensions. We come with what we have done. We come as who we are. In your love we find peace and hope. Amen

God of love we are sorry that at times our love for you falters; that we get our priorities wrong; that we overlook your guidance. O God forgive us and renew us. Loving Saviour we are sorry that we disobey your commandments; that we fail to love; that we walk by on the other side. O God forgive and renew us. Spirit of truth we are sorry that we disregard your presence; that our thoughts and feelings are unrighteous; that we follow the world's way. O God forgive and renew us.

May your presence abiding in us lead us in the right way, your way, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer – Modern form

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. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

[Hymn - Ye servants of God \(StF 340/H&P 278\)](#)

Ye servants of God,
your Master proclaim,
and publish abroad
his wonderful Name;
the Name all-victorious
of Jesus extol:
his kingdom is glorious;
he rules over all.

God ruleth on high,
almighty to save;
and still he is nigh:
his presence we have.
The great congregation
his triumph shall sing,
ascribing salvation
to Jesus our King.

Salvation to God
who sits on the throne!
Let all cry aloud,
and honour the Son.
The praises of Jesus
the angels proclaim,
fall down on their faces,
and worship the Lamb.

Then let us adore,
and give him his right:
All glory and power,
all wisdom and might,
all honour and blessing,
with angels above,
and thanks never ceasing
and infinite love.

(Charles Wesley)

1st Reading – Acts 17 v 22 - 31

22 Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. **24** “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human

hands. **25** And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **26** From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. **27** God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28** 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'^[a] As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' **29** "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. **30** In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. **31** For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Meditation

READING - ATHENS - READING

Athens seems a long way from Reading, especially during this time of lock down and isolation. I've heard a lot about Italy but not much about Greece. How have they been affected?

It's just as well they didn't have a lock down during the time Paul was in Athens. I don't think he would have been very patient being stuck indoors, although of course he had to get used to house arrest later in Rome. But he was still able to write and talk to those who visited him.

Anyway, back to Athens. Paul was never one to shirk an argument or to take on the elite of his day. He was so fired with faith that nothing was going to stop him, even when talking to the most sceptical amongst those he met – in fact, those he went out of his way to meet – in the Aeropagus in Athens. He was prepared to challenge them on on their own ground.

Never one to be pushed around, he was always ready to argue his case to all and sundry. Mind you, he had had some pretty good teachers. Although I am sure he was passionate in his arguments, his words did not always fall on good soil. In that regard he was just like Jesus during his ministry. There were just as many sceptics in those days as there are now, and Paul was not going to be put off.

To those who believed in 'gods' at a distance, Paul brought them the news that his God was not at a distance, but close at hand. He was here among them and within them. As Paul said to them, *'God did this so that people everywhere would seek him and perhaps reach out and find him, although he is not far from each of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.'*

That was alright for Paul, but what about me cooped up here in Reading, isolated from family, friends, neighbours and acquaintances alike. What good can I do?

Well, yes Lord, that is true. I do have more time to read and think about things. I hear of all those who have been prepared to give their lives for others during the present crisis. I have seen on the TV (some of you probably have other media options) what some are doing to raise money for others. I looked on in wonder as Captain Tom raised more than £30 million for NHS charities (but I hope not at the expense of other charities!) You could say he was in the right place at the right time. (By the way, wasn't that the same as Paul?)

But I started to think about myself. As well as remembering all those who need my prayers at this time, should I not use all that I have available to me to continue working for Christ. A simple phone call can mean a lot to some people. You never know your phone call may come just when they are at their lowest ebb. And I can use what media skills I have to keep in touch and help others to know they are not forgotten, but are loved by us and of course by Jesus.

As I continued to think about things, I realised I can still be a voice for Christ now, just as Paul was in Athens. Thank you God. Help me to remember there is always something I can do for my risen Saviour.

[Hymn – Jesus shall reign where'er the sun \(StF 328/H&P 239\)](#)

Jesus shall reign where'er the sun
Does his successive journeys run;
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

For Him shall endless prayer be made,
And praises throng to crown His head;
His Name like sweet perfume shall rise
With every morning sacrifice.

People and realms of every tongue
Dwell on His love with sweetest song;
And infant voices shall proclaim
Their early blessings on His Name.

Blessings abound wherever He reigns;
The prisoner leaps to lose his chains;
The weary find eternal rest,
And all the sons of want are blessed.

Let every creature rise and bring
its grateful honours to our King;
Angels descend with songs again,

And earth repeat the loud amen!

(Isaac Watts)

(If you have any young people with you, they might like to draw something they can see while we look at the following passage, and then join us for the next hymn which I think they will enjoy singing along to)

2nd Reading – John 14 v 15 – 21 (Living Bible)

15-16 “If you love me, obey me; and I will ask the Father and he will give you another Comforter, and he will never leave you. **17** He is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who leads into all truth. The world at large cannot receive him, for it isn’t looking for him and doesn’t recognize him. But you do, for he lives with you now and some day shall be in you. **18** No, I will not abandon you or leave you as orphans in the storm—I will come to you. **19** In just a little while I will be gone from the world, but I will still be present with you. For I will live again—and you will too. **20** When I come back to life again, you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. **21** The one who obeys me is the one who loves me; and because he loves me, my Father will love him; and I will too, and I will reveal myself to him.”

Reflection:

Jesus brings out in this passage positive teaching to his disciples, even as he contemplates leaving the world.

There are many words that can be used to describe the Holy Spirit – Counsellor, Advocate, Helper and Comforter – to name but a few. Whatever word we use, it should enable us to see how central the Spirit is to our relationship to Jesus and the Father, all of which is built on love.

The reason I used the Living Bible translation for our Gospel reading is that it says, '*...he will give you another Comforter (the Spirit) and he will never leave you.*'

I hope I don't go 'off piste' too far in my thoughts, but during this time of lock down and isolation, it seems to me that 'Comforter' was the most appropriate word to use.

We were very fortunate that only a few days before the lock down occurred, we had made a trip to the Isle of Wight and had spent some time with my wife's sister. She is now in total isolation for 12 weeks as she had a heart transplant at Papworth some four and a half years ago. So no more trips to the Isle of Wight for the foreseeable future. We also used to look forward to going to pick up our eldest grandson from school in Sandhurst on a Friday afternoon. We also had our youngest grandson, who is now 16 months old, to stay with us most weekends from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon. All suddenly came to an end.

For some, the lock down has been even more severe as some immediate family members have been kept apart for weeks due to their occupation or to one partners' vulnerability. For others, just being isolated at home alone, is a great strain on their resources.

It seems to me that Jesus is almost talking directly into this situation, and the Holy Spirit the Comforter is there to give us all strength and resilience during these troubled times.

Despite the imminent departure of Jesus, in bodily form, he promises us that we will not be left as orphans, in other words left alone, although it might seem like that to some at the moment.

He says he will live again, and we know he does – Hallelujah.

Jesus' promise is that *'when I come back to life again you will know that I am in the Father, and you in me and I in you.'* Does your faith lead you to believe that today? Again, Hallelujah, thanks to the Comforter, the Holy Spirit who is with us always.

So what do we have to do? Listen to the words of Jesus again:
'The one who obeys me is the one who loves me, and because he loves me my Father will love him.'

Here is the Trinitarian Godhead at work within each one of us. Is that not a 'comfort' but also a 'challenge' during these difficult days.

Let me just quote from some thoughts of David Adam, who was Vicar of Lindisfarne for 13 years before his retirement:

'In today's Gospel we hear mention of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and how the Spirit of God abides in us. We are not alone in the world, for the Spirit is with us and Christ comes to us. We must learn to be aware of and to rejoice in their presence and their love.'

Let us never forget that as we make our *"One more step along the world'*, the love of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit will be with us to keep us travelling from the old to the new as we *'keep travelling along with you.'*

[Hymn – One more step along the world I go \(StF 476/H&P 746\)](#)

One more step along the world I go,
One more step along the world I go;
From the old things to the new,
Keep me travelling along with you:
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

Round the corners of the world I turn,
More and more about the world I learn;
All the new things that I see
You'll be looking at along with me.
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

As I travel through the bad and good,
Keep me travelling the way I should.
Where I see no way to go,
You'll be telling me the way, I know.
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

Give me courage when the world is rough,
Keep me loving though the world is tough;
Leap and sing in all I do,
Keep me travelling along with you:
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

You are older than the world can be,
You are younger than the life in me;
Ever old and ever new,
Keep me travelling along with you:
And it's from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.

(Sydney Carter)

Prayers of intercession –

Dear Lord, we bring into your love those who do not know you and your love; those who have turned away from you; those who struggle to accept you; those who refuse to listen. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord we bring into your love those who need especial support at this time; those who are alone; those who are abused; those who are neglected; those who are finding this time of lock down and isolation particularly hard. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord we bring into your love those who work in critical occupations at this time – the NHS, Care Homes, Emergency Services, Courier Services, Supermarket staff and all those who have continued to work during this time of lock down. May your love touch them and transform their lives.

Dear Lord, we bring into your love, ourselves and all those whom we love, and who we have not been able to see for the past few weeks. We pray for your continued blessing on each one of us, on our families and friends. May your love touch us and transform our lives.

May we show the power and presence of your love in what we can do and say in these exceptional times. Amen.

[Hymn – Come down O love divine \(StF 372/H&P 281\)](#)

Come down, O love divine, seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
and kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, til earthly passions turn
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight,
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

Let holy charity mine outward vesture be,
and lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart, which takes the humbler part,
and o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till they become the place
where-in the Holy Spirit finds a dwelling.

(Bianco da Siena)

Benediction – Go in peace to live in love, to show God's love, to receive God's love – everywhere, and at all times. And so may grace, mercy and peace, from God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, continue to be with us for evermore. Amen.