

Christ Church, Ipswich

Sunday 22nd August 2021

Sunday Worship

Hello, I hope you are well. It is great to be joining you again for worship. This morning, our Bible readings will be Ephesians 6:10-20 and John 6:56-69 with our focus being on our Gospel reading. In John 6 we will find the disciples struggling to understand Jesus' teaching. He encourages them by saying that his words are 'spirit and life', but reminds them of some challenges too. When he asks if they will leave him, we will hear Peter's response, '*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*' They make the active decision to follow Jesus despite the difficulty, intrigued by the journey ahead. Let us worship God:

Call to worship

Our God offers us hospitality,
and God's welcome is generous.
God is here among us, meeting with us
in our worship and in our fellowship.
God longs to meet our needs
as we come with hands open
and arms outstretched.

A gathering prayer

Welcoming God,
we come to you with open hearts
and with open hands.

We come with our faith and hope,
and with our doubts and fears.
Send your Holy Spirit to work among us,
filling us and changing us
to become more like Jesus.

Eternal God,
source of all life,
today we choose to follow you.
Be present in all we think, say and do.
Powerful redeemer, speak to our hearts.
Holy God, we draw close to you. **Amen.**

R&S 532 Lord of creation, to you be all praise!

Lord of creation, to you be all praise!
Most mighty your working, most wondrous your ways!
Your glory and greatness no mortal can tell,
and yet in the heart of the humble you dwell.

Lord of all power, I give you my will,
in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil.
Your bondage is freedom, your service is song;
and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.

Lord of all wisdom, I give you my mind,
rich truth that surpasses my knowledge to find;
what eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
is taught by your Spirit and shines from your word.

Lord of all bounty, I give you my heart;
 I praise and adore you for all you impart,
 your love to inspire me, your counsel to guide,
 your presence to shield me, whatever betide.

Lord of all being, I give you my all;
 if e'er I disown you, I stumble and fall;
 but, led in your service your word to obey,
 I'll walk in your freedom to the end of the way.

Jack Winslow (1882-1974) altd.*
 © Mrs J Tyrrell

***A word of welcome and a prayer with our younger children (under 11s)
 before they go to enjoy an activity led by our Junior Church teachers***

A prayer of adoration

Loving God, giver of life;
 Lord Jesus, friend and Saviour;
 Holy Spirit, living water –
 we worship and adore you.
 We come today,
 not having or expecting all the answers
 but knowing that you are the way. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

When we turn away from you, O God,
 and go our own way:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 When the way ahead is not clear,
 when everything feels too much
 and we turn our backs on you:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 When we make wrong decisions
 and our actions hurt others:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 When we want to give up because it's too hard:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 When we cannot see beyond ourselves and act selfishly:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 When we do not put you and others first:
forgive us, and turn us back to you.
 Turn us back to you, O God. **Amen.**

Assurance of forgiveness

Despite going our own way and not following you,
 despite our doubts and fears of your presence,
 you are there gently leading us,
 reaching out your arms of healing and forgiveness.
 Thank you, eternal God. **Amen.**

A prayer of praise and thanksgiving

Thank you, Lord, for your unfailing love.
 Thank you that even with all our doubts and fears
 and worries about the journey ahead,
 you are there by our side.
 Where else can we turn? To whom shall we go?
 Thank you that you are our rock and our salvation,
 our strength and our high tower.
 Thank you that as we choose to go on this journey with you,
 as we make decisions and plans,
 you are there, gently leading and guiding,
 always present.
 Praise you, Lord, for your constant love and faithfulness. **Amen.**

R&S 294 Come down, O Love Divine

1. 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.

2. O let it freely burn,
 till 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.

3. 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.

4. 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 he become the place
 wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling.

Bianco Da Siena (d. 1434)
 tr. R. F. Littledale (1833-90)

Epistle Reading Ephesians 6:10-20

The Whole Armour of God

¹⁰ Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹ Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹² For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³ Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. ¹⁵ As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷ Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

¹⁸ Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. ¹⁹ Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel,²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak.

Gospel Reading**John 6:56-69**

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever. ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

The Words of Eternal Life

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.'

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'

Reflection

In our reading today from John, we hear Jesus teaching, using the imagery of food and what to eat. Not that this is palatable teaching! I don't know what you think, but I must say that to me, this sounds like quite a difficult passage, doesn't it?

First, Jesus briefly reminds his disciples of what he has already been saying and we see that John lets us know that Jesus is speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum. It is not clear in the text when Jesus and his followers moved from the lake, the setting in the preceding verses and into the synagogue. Maybe this conversation was taking place as they walked from the shore to the synagogue. Maybe they were all in the synagogue on a sabbath. And perhaps this discussion is taking place as they were eating and hence, the continuation of the '*I am the bread of life*' theme. Certainly, Synagogue gatherings usually involved a meal followed by a structured conversation.

Next, we hear how this conversation progresses to the point where the disciples, and other people listening in, respond. Here the referred to 'disciples' includes a wider group of interested individuals, some of whom, like the twelve, would be quite committed to Jesus, and others who were less so. Really, it looks like the response is pretty negative on the whole! The people explain that the teaching is too hard and we might hear echoes of the complaints found in the stories in the Old Testament, when the people were in the wilderness after the Exodus. Jesus' listeners were delighted to be fed with bread but this teaching is more than they can stomach! Jesus doesn't appear to help them here; he doesn't answer the complaint about the hard to hear teaching. He actually compounds it with words about the Son of Man returning from where he came, and implying that even if these people saw that happen, they still wouldn't find the teaching acceptable.

Then, in verse 63-64, Jesus does offer some sort of explanation as he draws a contrast between spirit and flesh, suggesting that the teaching is of the spirit and those of the flesh cannot receive it. This might remind us of the story of Nicodemus (John 3) with its similar theme. The contrast here is between what human nature can conceive and what the spirit brings about. Jesus says that he has spoken words of spirit and life, but he knows that some, or maybe most, won't grasp this and so we have verse 65 repeating verse 44, explaining how only those drawn by the Father will come to him.

And as we heard, as if to prove his point, at that very moment, 'many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him' (verse 66). Jesus then asks the twelve if they also want to leave him and we then hear Peter's wonderful confession; '*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.* ⁶⁹ *We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God*' (verse 68). Perhaps this is the point of this whole section of John. As one commentator suggests, here we find 'Jesus sifting the wheat

from the chaff, getting to grips with the group that he will have to work with for the next couple of years, and trying to ensure that they have some inkling of what they are signing up for.'

Hopefully, I've offered one or two helpful comments on this text and I leave these few thoughts with you. I must say, I do wonder whether we should just simply sit for a moment with the shock and discomfort that this teaching would have caused. Is this exaggerated language that Jesus uses intended to challenge how much people really want the life he offers? Perhaps we might reflect on our own level of desire to live life more fully through the way of Jesus. Jesus says he lives because of the Father. We see that John's Jesus is immersed in God, thoroughly living in the life of God, completely devoted to God as he lives and acts as one with God. We might want to consider to what extent do we want this God filled life? It certainly looks like Jesus is saying that he will satisfy our true hunger. This is good news indeed!

I wonder, are we able to recognise this hunger in our own lives and do we trust the source of its satisfaction? I still don't think we can avoid how odd some of the words are here! But perhaps we just embrace them! I do like how Joanna Love, from the Iona Community, suggests we do this in her comment on this passage. She writes, 'get right into him. Feast on him and live. Eat this bread that far surpasses the miraculous manna of the past. Enter the dwelling-place of God, not a Temple of stone and wood, but the Spirit-filled life we embody in our own selves when we commit ourselves to God.' She notes how the reactions of those present in the Gospel are portrayed 'as all or nothing. Some leave for good. The Twelve declare their trust and stay.' Perceptively, she recognises that 'for us as disciples now, our experience may be more of a mix of allegiance one day and abandonment the next' and she offers some important questions that I'd like to leave with you: when our hearts are not with God, where are they? What have we found too hard about Jesus' teaching? Why have we stayed nonetheless? Amen.

(A moment for reflection)

A personal prayer

Generous God,
 you always love us,
 always want the best for us,
 always inspire us to grow.
 You offer us life in all its fullness,
 and give us the freedom to choose
 how we respond to you.
 We offer our lives back to you,
 and pray that you accept our love in return
 and work through us as we seek to lovingly serve others. **Amen.**

R&S 277 How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
 in a believer's ear:
 it soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,
 and drives away our fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole,
 and calms the troubled breast;
 'tis manna to the hungry soul,
 and to the weary, rest.

Dear Name! the rock on which I build,
 my shield and hiding place,
 my never-failing treasury, filled
 with boundless stores of grace:

Jesus! my Shepherd, and my Friend,
 my Prophet, Priest and King,
 my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
 accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart,
 and cold my warmest thought;
 but when I see thee as thou art,
 I'll praise thee as I ought.

Till then I would thy love proclaim
 with every fleeting breath;
 and may the music of thy Name
 refresh my soul in death.

Our prayers of intercession

O God of mercy and of peace,
we hold before you the peoples of Afghanistan,
be living bread to those who are hungry each day.

Be healing and wholeness to those
who have no access to healthcare
amidst the ravages of the pandemic.

Be a true home to all
who have been displaced.

Be open arms of loving acceptance
to those who fear because of their
gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religious or political views.

Be peace to those engaged in armed conflict,
and those who live within its shadow.

Turn our hearts and minds to your ways
of just and gentle peace;
open our eyes to see you
in all acts of compassionate care.

Strengthen our hearts to step out in solidarity
with your suffering people,
and hold us all in your unfailing love.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,
who emptied himself of all but love,
in order to bring life in all its fullness. **Amen.**

Loving and gracious God,
we pray also for those in need within our church family and for those close to us.
We remember before you all those who are struggling due to health difficulties at the moment.
We pray especially for Joan and Frank Cross, Pat and Roy Smith, Bill and Irene Gale
and in a moment of quiet we bring other church friends and loved ones in need before you.

A moment for our prayers

Loving Lord, we ask that you draw close to all those in need.
May they know your help and strength at this time. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come; thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever. **Amen.**

R&S 366 And can it be that I should gain

And can it be that I should gain
 an interest in the Saviour's blood?
 Died he for me, who caused his pain;
 for me, who him to death pursued?
 Amazing love! How can it be
 that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
 Who can explore his strange design?
 In vain the first-born seraph tries
 to sound the depths of love divine.
 'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
 let angel-minds enquire no more.

He left his Father's throne above—
 so free, so infinite his grace—
 emptied himself of all but love,
 and bled for Adam's helpless race.
 'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
 for, O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
 fast bound in sin and nature's night;
 thine eye diffused a quickening ray—
 I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
 my chains fell off, my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

No condemnation now I dread;
 Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
 Alive in him, my living Head,
 and clothed in righteousness divine,
 bold I approach the eternal throne,
 and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Charles Wesley (1707-88)

A sending out prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
 to whom shall we go?
 You have the words of eternal life,
 and we have come to believe and know
 that you are the Holy One of God.
 Go with us into your world. **Amen.**

The Blessing

And may the blessing of our gracious God,
 Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
 be upon us and all those we love, this day and always. **Amen.**

The Grace

Holding one another in our prayers, we say together:
**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
 the love of God
 and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
 be with us all,
 for evermore. Amen.**

Every blessing to you,
Neil