



PERSONAL SERVICE – 14TH MARCH 2021

Hymn STF 81, H&P 566, MP 486 “Now thank we all our God”

Prayer

Loving God, we praise you for the love we receive from you throughout our lives. That love reaches out to us from the moment of our birth. We thank you for welcoming us into the worldwide family of the church through our baptism. We are united with our brothers and sisters around the world. Heavenly Father, your love enfolds us all.

We remember that your son Jesus came to share in our life here on earth and made his home among us at Nazareth. We thank you for Mary and for the care she took of him in his early years. She shared in his pain and suffering but she also shared in his triumph.

Loving God, we thank you for our homes and families and especially today for our mothers and for all they mean and have meant to us. All through our lives we have reason to be grateful to our mothers. We thank you for the help, comfort and support we have received over the years. We thank you for our mothers and pray that the love we have received may also be shown by us.

Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10

This passage is almost a summary of gospel for Paul, that we are saved entirely by God’s grace, received through faith. The phrase is repeated twice in the reading. Paul’s other great theme is the union of the believer with Christ. The Christian has died to sin with Christ and has been raised with him to a new life. Baptism is the image Paul uses to convey this teaching.

Reading: John 3:14-21

This passage refers back to an incident in Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites had complained that God was treating them badly during their wanderings in the wilderness as they were afflicted by serpents. God told Moses to make an image of a serpent and put it on a pole so that those who looked at it in faith would be healed. Healing and renewal come from God when someone turns in faith to a representation of what is causing their distress. The gospel uses this symbolism to illustrate the significance of the death of Jesus. Outwardly Jesus suffers because of humanity’s rejection of God. But paradoxically, at the moment of his humiliation he is robbing evil of its power to have the last word. In him, God is reconciling the world to himself and is inviting humanity to find pardon and hope in Jesus.

Hymn STF 440, H&P 215, MP 31 “Amazing grace”

Sermon

Today is Mothering Sunday, the day when we particularly give thanks to God for our mothers. We thank God for all we have received from our mothers, for all they've done for us and for all they are for us. We know what an enormous role mothers play in the lives of most of us. They play a huge role in caring for us, in nurturing us, in training and teaching us, helping in so many ways that we couldn't even list. Part of that role is helping us to realise our potential, helping us to be the people we could be.

That idea is reflected in the reading we heard earlier from Ephesians. God has made us the people we are, full of potential, but how much of that potential is actually realised. Some recent research I read about suggests that the average person uses only 10% of their potential during their lifetime. Now I'm not sure quite how you would measure that, but it should certainly make us stop and think. One of the essential roles of parents is to help children to be what they could be and to become what they could become. But it isn't only parents, that is also the role of teachers and it's also part of the role of the church.

How do we help people to be the people that God created them to be? How do we release potential, the potential that is present in every one of us? It doesn't need to be anything grand or impressive. We aren't thinking of Olympic coaches driving athletes on to a record breaking or medal winning performance. We're thinking about small things, basic things, a word of encouragement or congratulation. We're thinking about a word of appreciation and thanks for a job well done. That's something we can all do, a brief comment that affirms what someone else has done, that encouraging phrase that can mean so much when it is genuinely said.

We need to consider how we as a church release the potential of those who are part of our church life and our church family. That is something we need to think about very seriously in the church. We all have something to offer. Some of us may feel that isn't much, but we can all be the people God made us to be.

If we do achieve so little of our potential, why is that? Why don't we release more? Sometimes it's because we're too shy or too modest, we're British, we don't like blowing our own trumpet, so we keep quiet. A school report once said, "The problem with hiding your light under a bushel too long is that no-one knows if it's gone out." Another answer is given in the other reading we heard earlier from John's gospel. That reading talks in terms of darkness and light and sometimes we prefer the darkness of obscurity, rather than the light.

Light and darkness is an image that is often used in church. We often talk about the light Jesus brought into the world, John's gospel often speaks in those terms. Sometimes we take light for granted, it's always there when we need it, it's always there at the flick of a switch. But we do notice when it isn't. I remember an evening service I took at my first church in a former mining village in County Durham. It was new year and I was just praying for those who looked to the new year in dread and prayed they might have courage to face the future and realise it isn't as dark as they feared when suddenly there was a power cut and we were plunged into total darkness. It couldn't have been better timed if it was planned.

The reading from Ephesians sees things in terms of light and darkness as well. The first three verses invite the reader to look back to their previous life, a life that was lived in the darkness, a life that was lived without God. He then points out how their life and experience have been transformed by God. Those verses give a very basic account of what God has done. He makes clear that it is all gift, it is all totally undeserved.

There is an old Bedouin story. During a heated argument a young man struck and killed a friend of his. Knowing the customs of his people he fled in the darkness out into the desert. He went to the tent of the tribal chief to ask for his protection and the old chief took him in. The following day the young man's pursuers arrived and demanded that he be handed over to them. The chief protested that he had given his word to protect this young man. They told the chief that he didn't know who the young man had killed, but he swore to keep his word. One of the visitors blurted out, "But he killed your son." The chief was deeply shaken by the news and he stood silently for a long time. Finally he raised his head and said, "Then he shall become my son and everything I have will one day be his." The young man clearly had done nothing to deserve such generosity. Love that is undeserved is love in its purest form.

Everything depends on God and who God is. There's an old Dennis the Menace cartoon where Dennis and his friend are leaving a neighbour's house with their hands full of cookies. His friend said, "I wonder what we did to deserve this." Dennis answered, "Mrs Wilson gives us cookies not because we're nice, but because she's nice."

It isn't about us, it's about God. He is our loving father who reaches out to us even though we don't deserve it. We sometimes talk about unconditional love. We talk about the unconditional love a mother has for her child. But the supreme picture of unconditional love is the love of God shown in Jesus. In that reading from John's gospel we find one of the most famous verses in the

entire bible. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, today we bring you our prayers for mothers. We pray for those who find motherhood fulfilling and are happy to live self-sacrificially. We pray for those who find motherhood a trial and are often tired and short-tempered.

We bring you our prayers for those who are parents. We pray for those who have given up a great deal for their children. We pray for those who are finding it hard to be giving of themselves all the time.

We pray for those who are experiencing the ups and downs of family life. We pray for those families where love and support are given and received. We pray for those families where relationships are difficult and where there are differences that are unresolved.

We pray for our church family, especially for those we haven't seen for many months. We pray for those who are struggling at this time and long to be able to meet up with family and friends again. We pray for those who have been bereaved and for those still suffering the effects of this virus.

We bring these and all our prayers in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn STF 663, MP 857 "I, the Lord of sea and sky"

Blessing

May God, the giver of hope, fill you with all joy and peace because you trust in him, so that you may have abundant hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.