

Personal service 7 March 2021

Jesus our brother,
you followed the necessary path and were broken on our behalf.
May we neither cling to our pain where it is futile,
nor refuse to embrace the cost when it is required of us;
that in losing our selves for your sake,
we may be brought to new life,
Amen.

Janet Morley

StF 87/ HP 56 Praise to the living God

Prayer of approach:

God of wisdom and justice, we long to imagine your thoughts, but our minds are too small, we cannot fathom your limitless love, your interest in us, your reaching out to be part of our lives, our breathing, our actions. Help us to be still, to let you be present in us, to mould our thoughts and our hopes.

God of compassion, we ask your forgiveness for our inner blindness, the fear that sometimes closes our minds to the needs and perspectives of others, the anxiety that makes us protect our own interests. We ask that you will cleanse our sight, and renew us with your healing energy.
Amen.

The Lord speaks words of grace: 'Go in peace, your sins are forgiven'.
Thanks be to God.

OT reading - Exodus 20: 1-17
Epistle - 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25
Gospel - John 2: 13-22.

StF 334/ HP 231 Praise to the Holiest

Reflection:

Lent leads us to question ourselves and our place in the world, to question God, to question our discipleship - what sort of God are we dealing with? We are called to be concerned about the things Jesus was concerned about, to do the things he did. Perhaps we need to take small

steps, otherwise we might feel overwhelmed... What sort of challenge does faith issue to the world? Are we too at home in it? What gives life? What does damage?

The passage from Exodus is the third in a series of covenants in which God reveals God's self and sets out the terms for an enduring covenant with Israel. What we refer to as the 'ten commandments' provides the grounding for the covenant - who God is - and what God demands from God's covenant people. We know how easy it is to lose the starkness of God's requirements, to tame God to our way of doing things. But here God is disclosed as the God who saves, who rescued the Israelites from Egypt. This is the God who is holy, demanding, fearsome; the people are not to experiment with other gods or things as objects of worship. In our times, these 'other gods' might be racism, sexism, consumerism, militarism etc. - in other words, any attitude or position that we adopt that organises our life on a principle other than, smaller than, the momentous freedom and love of God's way. God is not 'useful', God can't be packaged or domesticated, or made into a means to an end, to support our agenda, our purposes. The God of the covenant stands for freedom and well-being and relationship, and against every kind of exploitation or oppression, or any using of others as commodities.

This God asks us to throw out the distractions, the back-ups, and rely on God alone. There are practical implications for behaviour. The Sabbath is a day of rest, a day to sort out our priorities. We are reminded that the earth wasn't made just for us; we are only part of the whole creation. 'Remember who you are, you didn't make all this, and you aren't there to make money for someone else - neither are other people!'

God's rules for living together mean discarding our habits of power and status, the dominance of the strong over the weak. Showing respect for others means putting restrictions on our instincts. We can't just take what we want, or use power to gain our own ends.

Paul in the verses from 1 Corinthians reminds us that God's way is a reversal of the world's values. God can't be understood by any sign in the created world, because our human minds end up making God in our own image. Our wisdom puts human reasoning at the centre, leaving God out of account. No, says Paul, the only thing which can lead us to God is Christ crucified, and by human standards that is absurd. He mocks the pretensions of those who think themselves wise - such 'wisdom' is

helpless in the face of the 'weakness' and 'foolishness' of God. The crucifixion of Christ is an offence to both Jews and Gentiles, because it means that human attempts to comprehend, or sum up, God through speculation or philosophy, fail. God 'comes down' to be where human beings are. Christ crucified reveals the character of God, he is the ultimate sign of God's wisdom and the power of love. The 'wisdom of the cross' helps us to find God deeply involved in humanity and the human predicament. We are shown God in the midst of injustice and oppression, reinterpreting through the life and death of Jesus what it is to see and value in God's way. Jesus turns upside down our view of the foolish, the weak, the despised and marginalised: they are the ones who may be standing in the right place to see what God needs us all to see.

Jesus, in John's gospel story of the cleansing of the temple, is ruthless in his condemnation of those who are using a place dedicated to God as a commercial opportunity. He tells his hearers that if they want to find God and God's ways, they should look at his actions. This is the challenge for us - how to look for a big enough God? That God is found in the foolishness of the cross.

Prayers of intercession:

Holy God, maker of all things and inspirer of human community, we give thanks for our world, its diversity and creativity. We give thanks for the beauty of the earth and oceans, and all animal and plant life. We confess that we have exploited the resources of nature for our own purposes, that we have used the earth as a giant dustbin, polluted the soil and the seas and the air. Forgive us that we have been swept along by the demanding god of consumerism, so that others suffer because of our desire for cheap clothes, or cars or air travel. Gracious God, help us to live more simply, to honour our environment and all those with whom we share our human space. We pray for politicians and industrialists, that they may have the vision and motivation to tackle climate change in realistic and effective ways.

Lord, in your mercy...

God of love, we remember all who are living in places of conflict, for Yemen, Myanmar, Belarus, Hong Kong. We confess that our government is responsible for allowing the sale of arms to those engaged in wars, and countries that pursue unjust and oppressive policies. We pray for greater openness and transparency, and a change of heart by those in power.

Lord, in your mercy...

God of hope, we pray for all those who are seeking to change their lives, to do things differently and live with greater purpose and a new vision.

We thank you that you have made each human being unique and precious, with gifts and desires and hopes. Help us to recognise each other, those we know and those we shall never meet, as fellow persons to be honoured in your name and for your sake.

We pray for those known to us who are sick or sorrowing or anxious at this time, that your peace may rest upon them.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Lord's Prayer

StF 545/ HP 378 Be thou my vision

Blessing

As you continue on your way,
May you know that God goes before you.
By the strength of his Spirit,
Share your faith with the uncertain;
Share your love with the unlovely;
Share your presence with the lonely;
And share God with everyone,
Just as God has shared himself with you,
In the unfading blessing of Jesus Christ,
Our Lord and Saviour.

The Word in the World