

Personal service 22 August 2021



Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
for he will speak peace to his people,
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts...

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
and righteousness will look down from the sky. *Psalm 85, v. 8, 10, 11.*

StF 134/ HP 457 / MP79 Christ, whose glory fills the skies

Prayer of approach and confession:

Gracious God, we give you thanks for your love for us and for all people, a love that does not depend on what we deserve or what we have done. You enter into every experience, you hold us in our weakness and doubt, you give us life and the energy to love and to grow.

[Silence]

God, we come seeking your forgiveness for our inner blindness, our fear of failure, our hesitancy in taking risks, the things we are ashamed of. We ask for your healing, your restoring grace, to know that we are accepted and loved beyond anything we can imagine.

Amen.

Readings:

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 14 – 18

John 6: 56 -69.

Reflection:

In our human life we are given some things by virtue of our parentage – our genetic make-up, our temperament, our ethnic background and culture, our height and physical appearance. As for faith, we may be baptised as a baby, and brought up with the expectation that we will be Christian, go to church, read the Bible, be confirmed.

‘Our family have always been Methodists...’? How often have you stopped to think about why you are a Christian? It is possible to inherit a religion, someone else’s faith, something others have taught you, but something which

has remained second-hand, not genuinely become your own. If faith is to be a source of life for us, it has to be something we choose for ourselves – and choose afresh every day.

In the first of the two readings, Joshua gets the tribes of Israel together and addresses them at Shechem. What is not included in the lectionary is Joshua's summary of the ups and downs of the Israelites' history, and their deliverance, nor his warning that whatever commitments Israel's leaders make, they will fail. The location is important – Shechem was the place where God had appeared to Abram, and promised a new land, and where Abram built an altar to the Lord. So Israel's leaders are surrounded by physical reminders of God's presence and promise. They are reminded of their responsibility for the people in their covenant with God, a commitment to draw the people close to God.

Joshua condemns the people's idolatry – it's not good enough to go on serving the gods of their ancestors, or get lured into worshipping the gods of the tribes in the land they are entering. Rather than the freedom of the covenant relationship with Yahweh, that will be another slavery. Joshua is tough with the people; Yahweh expects total commitment and loyalty. This is a patriarchal society, in which most people had few choices, and in which God is seen as authoritarian and demanding. It is like serving an earthly lord, but this God is also a God of justice and mercy.

Our world is different, at least in our part of it. We ostensibly have constant choice: we are encouraged to change our fuel or broadband provider to get a 'better deal'. We can vote in elections for a government, and turn them out if we don't like what is being done in our name. What is assumed is that we make a choice with a view to what we think will benefit us most, or do us least damage! This is something fairly immediate – we can see economic or political or social cause and effect. But the challenge Jesus puts to his disciples, and us, in John's gospel, has nothing to do with our immediate self-interest or advantage. It is a question of the commitment of life and soul, of all that is deepest in you, the restless bit of you which you can't ignore, which is always seeking something better and deeper in life, beyond the frustration of short-term satisfaction – the bit that seeks God, that's the bit we must listen to.

'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life...' But those words of eternal life caused offence to many, not just Jesus' traditional critics, the Jewish leaders, but to those who were his followers, and many left his company. So Jesus poses a challenge to the twelve, the chosen group – 'Well, what about you? Are you going to leave as well?' Like the Israelites grumbling in the wilderness because they don't trust God to provide, so some

of Jesus' followers don't believe that God can meet their hunger. What caused such offence is Jesus talking about eating his flesh and drinking his blood as the way to eternal life. Or is it perhaps the total scandal that a mere man could claim to be the one who reveals God? If we believe that, we have to question, and perhaps abandon what John calls 'the flesh', that is, a worldly way of seeing things, and valuing things – all our securities, our (religious?) traditions, all that has no true life to feed us. Instead, we are invited to become part of Jesus' death, so that we may live authentically, deeply. Sharing in Jesus' death means discovering in our own life the capacity to let God lead us in the way of self-sacrifice, for acts of self-giving love.

The language about eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus that John's gospel puts in the mouth of Jesus himself is difficult! Religious language has to paint pictures to convey the reality of God's life. For human beings to be fully alive, we have to recognise that it is the energy of God's love that animates us. This is the language of union, of sharing, of relationship.

These days it feels as though we are being encouraged to live in a world of separateness and competitiveness, each living in our own bubble, a world of 'personalised truth'- you can choose what you want to be true, you can be fed data or news that reinforces that view. It can make people want simple explanations for complex things, which makes relationships harder. We complain when the world isn't as we want it to be, which can blunt our capacity to be joyfully surprised by life. But in the midst of this, we have a pandemic which has brought out generosity and self-sacrifice and love in many different ways, and shown us examples of creative and authentic living.

What Jesus holds out to us is a life which takes responsibility for others out of love, regardless of the cost. When we receive bread and wine at communion, we are committing ourselves to acting out Jesus' sacrifice of love in our own lives. What is it about the life and words of Jesus that speaks to each of us? What are 'words of eternal life' for you? What are the words and actions of Jesus that make it possible for you to say to God, 'Yes, I'm coming with you'?

StF 359/ HP 532 Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice

Prayers of intercession:

Loving God, we give thanks for the earth which is our home, for the wonder of the natural world and the richness and diversity of human beings who inhabit

this planet. We pray for wisdom and far-sightedness in the way we use the earth's resources, and a greater sense of urgency in protecting them.

[Pause for reflection]

We pray for those parts of the world where there is strife, injustice and oppression, remembering Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Israel-Palestine, Belarus, Myanmar, and those parts of the world suffering from flooding and wildfires.

We pray for those in this country who struggle to survive, and for those who are not aware of this. We remember all those seeking asylum from conditions of poverty and oppression.

[Pause for reflection]

We pray for those known to us who are sick or anxious or sorrowing.

We offer to God the choices we make, that we may grow more aware of what love requires.

We offer all our prayers and our thoughts in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer.

StF 252/ HP 137 / MP 384 Jesus the Lord said 'I am the Bread'.

Lord,

isn't your creation wasteful?

Fruits never equal

the seedlings' abundance.

Springs scatter water.

The sun gives out

enormous light.

May your bounty teach me

greatness of heart.

May your magnificence

stop me being mean.

Seeing you a prodigal

and open-handed giver,

let me give unstintingly...

like God's own.

Helder Camara, Brazil, from *The Desert is Fertile* (Sheed and Ward, 1974)