

Personal service 9 May 2021



The Lord has made known his victory;  
he has revealed his vindication  
in the sight of the nations.  
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel...  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

*Psalm 98, v.2, 3, 9*

StF 83/ HP 13 / 560 Praise, my soul, the King of heaven

Prayers of approach and confession:  
We are the people who heal each other,  
who grow strong together,  
who name the truth,  
who know what it means  
to live in community,  
moving towards a common dream  
for a new heaven and a new earth  
in the power of the love of God,  
the company of Jesus Christ  
and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

*Dorothy McRae-McMahon, Liturgies for the Journey of Life*

We ask God's forgiveness for the times when we have been fearful of life and of other people, and looked to our narrow instinct for self-protection.

Lord, have mercy.

We ask God's forgiveness for our selfish disregard of the bigger picture of love and human solidarity, for our neglect of our planet and our desire to consume.

Lord, have mercy.

Loving God, pardon us, enlarge our loving, and renew our vision, in the name of Christ. Amen.

NT reading – Acts 10: 44-48

Gospel – John 15: 9-17

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

## Reflection:

It isn't easy to talk about love in a meaningful, deep way, because we have only human language, human pictures, to do so. Yet we must, to remind ourselves who we are, that we are the fruit of God's vast, mysterious, unfathomable love, which flows through us, into our world. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying '...if you, wicked as you are, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will God give good things to those that ask him.' (Not that we are 'wicked' exactly – Jesus is merely pointing out the contrast between the limited scope of our imagination and our loving, and that of God). People talk about the 'unconditional' love of a parent for their child; we do our best, but...we can always look back and think 'if only I had realised...' But we do have the inbuilt capacity to love, and Jesus calls upon his disciples to use that capacity, to let it grow and expand.

In many ways, the world gives us messages of scarcity, that go against the instinct of generosity. We have only to look at the responses of big pharmaceutical companies who want to guard their patents, and the attitudes of governments in the rich nations, to the situation of grave shortage of Covid vaccines in the global South. And there are voices that encourage us to separate ourselves from others, to build walls to protect ourselves – 'there isn't enough room, we must keep 'them' out'.

The danger is that we can limit God's loving and forgiving to our own small perspective: Peter had a hard lesson to learn on this. Becoming more deeply human means being more connected to others, expanding the scope of our compassion, doing justice as much as we can.

The latter part of John's gospel is not always straightforward. It was written towards the end of the first century after Jesus lived, and it represents the fruit of many years of reflection on 'Who is the Christ?' In the prologue to the gospel we see the grandeur, the mystery of the person of Christ, the Word of God, present in creation, coming into the world as the human Jesus. In the latter chapters, the writer depicts Jesus talking to his disciples in an extended discourse (with occasional interjections or puzzled mutterings from his listeners who don't get it!)

Jesus talks about the love that is between him and God, and between him and his disciples. He describes the intimacy he has with the disciples as friendship. Friendship was highly valued in the ancient world, and at its best it meant putting the well-being of the other first, and being willing to defend the life of a friend under threat. In modern societies, in which we find high levels of competitiveness, isolation, and fragmentation, it seems quite difficult to sustain friendship, despite all our electronic means of communication. Friendship speaks of empathy, solidarity, mutual struggle and support. Jesus talks to his followers as friends, 'if you do what I command you' – and that command is to love to the point of giving up life itself for the sake of the other.

For the writer of John's gospel, love takes its starting point and its meaning from the death of Jesus. This isn't a friendship rooted in mutual attraction of some sort, as ours mostly are. This is not equality, but a proper dependence on Jesus' love, and it goes with obedience. Jesus' friends will find themselves sustained by that love when life is tough. And there is no room for consumerist attitudes in the practice of love; Jesus' disciples can't choose when or whom to love, or demand any benefit from the relationship to meet their own needs. To be loved by Jesus will provoke the hostility of the world; to practise self-giving love is always a threat to the system (v.18) because it declares that loyalty and faithfulness to God's way takes precedence over loyalty to earthly interests or rulers. Love, in the way that Jesus talks about it here has implications for the way we do politics, how we live together in community. Politics is about who has power, and what kind, how resources are shared, etc. This is not simply about money and what it is spent on, but how political decisions affect relationships, how justice works. People need more than things; we flourish when we have a sense of belonging in a community, when we do justice, help others, practise responsibility for one another, when we put other people's interests before our own – all part of seeking the common good, discovering a purpose and meaning in life that is bigger than ourselves.

The reading from Acts recounts the conclusion of Peter's dramatic shift of understanding, brought about by the vision of the sailcloth full of food which was 'unclean' for Jews. Peter has come to Caesarea, having been sent for by the gentile Cornelius (a Roman centurion) who wants to know about Jesus. As Peter tells of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of forgiveness of sins and new life, an experience of the Holy Spirit comes upon all who hear, gentiles and Jews, and the Jewish believers are astounded. They have grown up with the deep conviction that God favoured the Jews, and that gentiles couldn't be accepted by God in the same way: tensions in this area rumbled on in the early Church, as Paul records. But God's renewing power doesn't depend on us, or on our faith or lack of it, or on our prejudices or regulations.

At this time, when Covid still dominates much of our lives, we must ask ourselves what sort of world are we making? It's not just governments who have a decisive effect, but civil society – all of us. What are the values that will determine the quality of our common life? Jesus gave his disciples a commandment, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It was to be love that would define the group, and enable his followers to transform the world.

God is always drawing us forward to new things. Our experience and God's active Spirit stretch us. We are called to venture beyond the boundaries we have created. 'Love one another as I have loved you'. Love always goes ahead of us, nudging us to further liberation, bigger vision, more hope.

Prayers of intercession:

God of love, we offer our prayers for the earth that you have given us as our home, that we may honour and nourish our planet as you nourish us. Help us to find ways to live sustainably and enable others to do so.

Lord, hear us...

We remember all who have been bereaved by Covid, all whose lives have been damaged and their confidence undermined. We commend to you the people of India and of South America where the death rates have risen dramatically. We give thanks for all those who are working to support neighbours and those in need, to build community through generosity of time and resources.

Lord, hear us...

We pray for countries in conflict, for Yemen, where people are suffering hunger and devastation, for Palestine/Israel, Syria, Afghanistan.

Lord, hear us...

We pray for all refugees and asylum seekers, as they try to find a place where they can live without fear and raise families in security.

Lord, hear us...

We pray for ourselves, bringing before you our hopes and our struggles, that you will show us a path to follow, a commitment to make. We offer all our prayers in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

StF 676/ HP 764 Christ, from whom all blessings flow

Blessing:

God to enfold me,  
God to surround me,  
God in my speaking,  
God in my thinking.  
God in my sleeping,  
God in my waking,  
God in my watching.  
God in my hoping.

*Carmina Gadelica 111, in Bread of Tomorrow, ed. Janet Morley*