



## Service for 27 September 2020

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads.

Who do you worship in this lonely dark corner of the temple with all the doors shut?

Open your eyes and see that God is not in front of you.

He is there where the farmer is tilling the hard ground and where the labourer is breaking stones.

He is with them in the sun and the rain

and his garment is covered with dust.

Put off your holy cloak

and like him come down onto the dusty soil.

from Rabindranath Tagore, *The Hidden God*, (Macmillan 1970)

StF 1/ HP1 /MP 20 All people that on earth do dwell

### Prayers of approach and confession

*You may like to place a lighted candle or a flower or pebble, or some other object to focus your attention, in front of you as you pray.*

Gracious God, we come at different times and in our different places, to acknowledge that you have sustained and kept us in your love at every moment of every day. You have given us life and a longing for you, a restlessness that is dissatisfied with what our world offers as consolations. Our minds cannot fathom your thoughts, nor our hopes measure up to the wonder of your creation and your continuing presence and concern for us.

*[Silence]*

*God, we worship you and we give you thanks.*

Gracious God, we lay before you the life that we live, the challenges we face, the anxieties that may burden us at this time. [Pause, and consciously let go of those things which are using up your energy and attention]. God, set us free to serve you and one another in love and compassion.

*[Silence]*

*God, we worship you and we give you thanks.*

Gracious God, hear us as we offer our confession this day. Forgive us for our neglect of others in their need, for not seeing what we needed to see, and getting our priorities wrong. Forgive us for our willingness to behave as though we are separate and self-sufficient, and not part of your overwhelming generosity, for putting greater value on our systems and institutions than on the demands of your love.

*[Silence]*

*Heal us, and set us free, we pray.*

*Amen. Thanks be to God.*

Old Testament reading – Exodus 17: 1-7

Gospel reading – Matthew 21: 23-32

StF 255/ HP 139/ MP 651 The Kingdom of God/ is justice and joy

Reflection

TV ads and the pressures of online advertising are something we take for granted these days. How, for example, do you steer your way through the maze of different providers of gas, electricity, broadband, house or car insurance? The bewildered consumer is led to believe that they will find a miraculous solution by going to Gocompare or Compare the Market. Not only is the problem solved, but you are now in a state of perfect contentment – no more hassle, but, instead, peace, joy, total well-being...Would that the transformed life were so simple! (or not!). From need to product, and, hey presto, instant resolution!

Some religious traditions seek to market God in this way. The snag is that if you do, then God must be judged according to whether your particular desired outcome happens.

That was the problem for the Israelites in the desert, with a water shortage. They react in the way human beings often do – blame the leader for being ineffective and incompetent. It's all Moses' fault. He's responsible for getting them into the crisis in the first place by leading them out of Egypt – there's no mention of Yahweh God. Moses' response is that their complaint is a challenge, a testing of Yahweh. Moses identifies his authority with that of God.

This divine-human relationship between God and the Israelites is being worked out in harsh conditions, where each is testing the other. The Israelites are anxious and they panic – who's in charge here? (The writer lays emphasis on the names which Moses gives to the place, meaning 'test' and 'quarrel' – these are important markers to be remembered. For him, this story is about Israel's lack of faith – 'is the Lord among us or not?'). They shouldn't have asked the question – they should have known and trusted the God who had brought them out of Egypt. But the only thing that counts for the Israelites is their circumstances at that moment – and if God doesn't measure up on that score, then God is no good. They demand that Yahweh give an account of himself; God must perform when the Israelites demand it. But God does meet that need for water: God involves himself in the process – 'I will be standing there in front of you on the rock'. Moses is to take his staff, the sign of God's authority, and bring with him a group of the elders of Israel. So it takes Moses' courage and trust, the witness of the elders, and the guarantee of God's presence, together. Only God can give the resources for life, but God does so through a cooperative effort.

'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test' – but that is exactly what the Israelites were doing. It is also what the chief priests and elders were doing in the gospel story, when they asked Jesus by what authority he did what he did. Jesus' authority is that of God in Christian understanding, but his actions bring him into conflict with the religious leaders who assume that they have authority as of right because they represent the religious tradition of Israel, which gives them their status in society. They question Jesus' right to forgive sins, to teach and interpret scripture, to heal. Their authority is a matter of traditional power, a prestige not backed up by their actions and lifestyle. They do not take kindly to Jesus challenging that authority in the name of the God they thought was their property. Jesus refuses to be held to account by them, because he knows they are not wanting to engage with God as Jesus knows God, but rather they are seeking to preserve their position in a political stand-off with Rome, and save face. Their problem is that they can't look at the evidence and be converted by it.

In the parable of the two sons who both change their minds, Jesus is inviting us to listen, to think, to decide on the basis of what we learn of him, how to live our lives. The tax collectors and the prostitutes in the story respond to Jesus because they have a real longing for change. Jesus calls us to respond to the claims of life, of people, of communities in need of healing. He invites us to be open, to be bruised, to change, and to expect to change more if we are to grow as disciples. Our human life is the place where we try to live on God's 'big map', where we practise the values of the 'heavenly banquet'.

At this time, when we are living in an atmosphere of uncertainty, and perhaps cynicism, and the future looks a daunting place, when we don't always know what we should be doing in order to be responsible, the temptation may be to long for the old familiar patterns of life and ways of 'doing church'. We don't want to be where we are, and we can perhaps understand the anxiety which led the Israelites to seek someone (God, via Moses) to blame for their predicament. We may long for what we are used to, and it may be hard to face the fact that we are being nudged by the challenge of new possibilities. There is the opportunity for the Church as a whole to rethink its communication with society, to become more inclusive. We love our familiar words, but perhaps we need to review 'religious jargon'. Our acts of loving listening and generosity to our neighbour, in whatever context that may be, can speak of the hope and the wholeness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

#### Prayers of intercession and thanksgiving

Loving God, Creator and Sustainer of all that is, we give thanks for this planet on which we live, for the life of plants and all creatures with which we share it and upon which we depend, whose well-being is inseparable from our own.

We give thanks for all earth's peoples in their richness and diversity of culture and language.

Lord, hear us.

*Lord, graciously hear us.*

We pray for the troubled places of the world – for Belarus, Libya, Syria, Palestine/ Israel, Yemen, Sudan.

We lay before you refugees and asylum-seekers, remembering those who have been trying to find somewhere safe to live following the catastrophic fires in Moria camp on Lesbos.

Lord, hear us.

*Lord, graciously hear us.*

We pray for governments and politicians, that they may find wisdom, clear-sightedness and compassion to face hard challenges.

We pray for all who have ongoing responsibilities as the world struggles to contain Covid 19 and find effective ways of dealing with it. We remember all who are suffering with the virus, and those who have been bereaved by it, and for all who risk their health in front-line services.

Lord, hear us.

*Lord, graciously hear us.*

We pray for those with whom we disagree, that we may learn to love our neighbour in deeper ways.

We pray for a world which seems polarized and suspicious, where truth is whatever each individual wants to believe.

Lord, hear us.

*Lord, graciously hear us.*

We pray for the Church worldwide, as it seeks to be an incarnation of hope and love.

We pray for ourselves, in this time of anxiety, that we may hear your voice of larger loving than we can manage – ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine’.

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

StF 715/ HP 408 The right hand of God.

### Blessing

May the mystery of God beckon us;

May the wisdom of God direct us;

May the forgiveness of God heal us;

May the energy of God send us into the world

to exercise justice and love,

and be a blessing to the nations.

*Kate Compston*