



Opening Prayer

Come into the presence of our God, and know that He is waiting for you. Come into His presence just as you are, and rest, listen for His voice, and praise Him for His love for you.

Hymn: All people that on earth (StF1) https://youtu.be/42_kOGDTpKg

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;
come ye before him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
without our aid he did us make:
we are his folk, he doth us feed;
and for his sheep he doth us take.

O enter then his gates with praise;
approach with joy his courts unto;
praise, laud, and bless his name always,
for it is seemly so to do.

For why, the Lord our God is good;
his mercy is for ever sure;
his truth at all times firmly stood,
and shall from age to age endure.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom heaven and earth adore,
from earth and from the angel host
be praise and glory evermore.

William Kethe (d. 1594)

Let us pray together

God of all time, I offer you this time of my worship.
Christ of all corners I offer you this corner of my home
Spirit of holiness, I offer you, my discipleship; may your presence empower me to shed sin as a butterfly sheds its chrysalis.
Father Son and Spirit, I am here for you right now. Amen

Bible Readings Jeremiah 4: 11-12, 22-28 and Luke 15: 1-10

Reflection:

Clare Harner (1909-1977) is the poet responsible for penning the poem often read at funerals “do not stand at my grave and weep” I confess that I cringe when this poem is read. As a minister, I possibly attend more funerals than most people and in my experience death and loss is seldom anything but painful and whilst the poem might well have nostalgic words, and I hope that it has been of comfort to some people as they have mourned their loved ones, the feeling of loss is very real, and I struggle with the last sentence “do not stand at my grave and cry, I am not there, I did not die” I want to scream “but you have died, and that hurts!”

I apologize for starting this reflection in such a depressing way, but I think that as human beings, and Brit’s we don’t deal well with the whole issue of loss very well, insisting on maintain the famous stiff upper lip and instead of accepting pain as a natural part of the of the process of loss. In the passage we have just read from the gospel according to St Luke, we hear of the shepherd losing a sheep and a woman losing her coin. Our natural inclination is to ignore the pain of loss and shift quickly onto the joy of finding the lost item, so if you will bear with me for a moment, I would like to focus on the emotion of loss.

If you were to travel around moorland areas of the UK in the spring each year you will see signs at the roadside asking drivers to slow down and be aware of lambs wandering onto the road and it is quite heart breaking when you see a lamb laid at the roadside after being obviously hit by a car. Venture out of the car and you will see signs asking dog walkers to ensure that their pet pooches are on a lead, and we should all be aware of the country code regarding closing gates and taking our litter home with us. Sheep are not wild animals; they are the stock of farmers who struggle to make ends meet with fleeces attracting lower prices and lambs for slaughter having the price screwed down by large supermarkets. Every single sheep and lamb is valuable and needs to be protected.

It is easy to look at the shepherd in the parable and say “why bother about one sheep? The shepherd has still got ninety-nine, what does one matter?” but the shepherd will have been responsible for the whole herd and the feeling of dread at discovering that one is missing would be extreme. Again, in twenty-first century Britain, coins hold very little monetary value. When I was a lad, I could buy a whole bag of sweets for a penny! Oh, the good old days! Back in the time of Jesus, young women would wear ten silver coins either as a head piece or a necklace as a kind of dowry. Some Bible commentators believe that it was perhaps one of these coins that Jesus was referring to rather than some loose change from a purse. So, for the shepherd and the woman, the loss was significant and would have been painful.

Philip Richter and Leslie J Francis published an excellent little book in 1998 entitled “Gone but not forgotten” in which they explore their concerns about the way the Christian Church in the UK has been haemorrhaging people for decades. I don’t believe that any of in any denomination in the UK today can be complacent, the Church of Christ continues to shrink in this country, and that breaks my heart, and I believe that it breaks God’s heart too. Looking back to the time of Jeremiah, the people have turned away from God. I often quote a question in Old Testament exam for Local Preaching many years ago “Is Jeremiah a pessimist? - discuss”

As of today, we have a new Prime Minister, and happy as Liz Truss looks, I wouldn’t want to have her job on any terms whatsoever. She faces the continuing saga over Brexit, the changes of the Climate Crisis, the war in Ukraine, escalating cost of living forcing increasing numbers of families into poverty and bankrupting businesses, a winter of discontent with strike action threatened, I could go on! The world is in a mess as far as I can see, and I increasingly feel like Jeremiah as I try to lead the Churches in the Circuit at these incredibly challenging times.

Remember that the essence to the gospel story is that Jesus was mixing with the wrong kinds of people in the eyes of the Pharisees. I can recall too many instances in my lifetime when the Church has cast out people, because they do not fit with our model. We offend people because their opinions don’t conform to what we believe, even because they don’t dress in ways that we would prefer. Jesus has a very clear ministry, to seek and save the lost the hymn writer says

*Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
Why do they roam?
Love only waits to forgive and forget;
Home! weary wanderer, home!
Wonderful love
dwells in the heart of the Father above.*

My guess is that there are plenty of people in the world today who are feeling lost, people who we rub shoulders with on a daily basis, people who are desperately trying to find comfort and meaning in their lives.

To Ponder:

- How do you cope when you feel desolate and lost? How do you deal with pain and loss?
- Who do you think people turn to if they have no faith or Church community around them?
- What do you think is the Church’s role in these challenging times? Are we fulfilling our mission?

A time of prayer -

The world is God’s temple. Let us pray for the world:

- for the powerful, that they may know that the world belongs not to them but to the God of love and justice;
- for the powerless, that they may know that God is alongside them in their hunger, fear and suffering.

The church is God’s temple. Let us pray for the church:

- for its leaders, that they may guide their people and the world to worship in word and deed;
- for the different denominations, that in unity they may come to know and worship the one, undivided God.

We are God’s temple. Let us pray for ourselves:

- for churches meeting in buildings, that they and we may become sanctuaries for the lonely, the worried and the sad, peoples of love and hope;
- for each one of us, that our lives may be hymns of worship to the eternal God, sung in confidence and joy. In the name of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. **Amen**

The Lord’s Prayer *Our Father*

Hymn: Listen to Love divine (StF503) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8q3jmXn6HTQ>

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come
down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always
blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without
ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before
thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise!
Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayers of offering and a blessing: Generous God, Out of love you created all that is; Out of love you created humankind; Out of love you save us from the consequences of our sin. Out of love, we offer you ourselves and all that we have. Accept them and us, in the name of the second Adam, your Son, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**