

Sunday worship on 3 January 2021

Call to worship: Gracious God, let the light of your face shine upon us; your peace rule in our hearts and your strength be our song. By the gift of your grace let us take up the cross and follow in the steps of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. (Matthew Henry 1662-1714)

Hymn – Jesus the name high over all (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSeAYKG-8Ko&t=27s>)

Prayer

Gracious God, on this day, I and many others seek to renew our covenant with You. Your love is strong and faithful. You never stop loving us. Our love for You is weak and fickle and we often fall short of what we have committed ourselves to be and do. Forgive us for our reluctance to follow Christ, our half-hearted worship, our failures in caring, service and witness, and our unwillingness to challenge injustice. Have mercy on us, O God, and renew in us both the desire and the ability to be people of love. Thank you for your gracious words:

‘Your sins are forgiven’. Amen.

Bible readings: Jeremiah 31: 7-14 & Matthew 2: 1-12

Message

I wonder what gifts you had for Christmas? When you get to a certain age, like Julian and me, it seems to be mainly food and drink!!! We seem to have far more of those than is good for us, especially when no one is allowed to come into our house and share them with us! Watch out for the elastic waistbands! I guess people want us to be sustained for future days, at least I hope so. I also had this wall plaque from Julian which reads “Be still and know that I am God” a text from Psalm 46, which will hang on the wall above my computer screen. It’s a text which always makes my shoulders go down and relieves tension, because if God is God then I don’t have to be – I don’t have to claim to know the answer, or to be in control, or to have made anything perfectly, because that is God’s job.

Our Old Testament reading for today is from the prophet Jeremiah. Now he was writing at a time when the whole nation had been conquered by the Babylonians and most of the population had been taken into exile. The rich were gone, the influential were gone, the King was gone and a lot of Jerusalem was obliterated. Only the poor and powerless were left behind. The exile was to last 70 years and in the passage we hear today, Jeremiah waxes lyrical about a return, it sounds great doesn’t it? There’s a great party atmosphere as people gather from the 4 corners of the earth, everyone is included and there will be dancing, mourning will be turned to joy etc and the bit that made me laugh was “I will give the priests their fill of fatness”! (sounds a bit like this Christmas).

It’s a picture of joy, a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven, everyone is included and weeping will be turned to joy.

I wonder if that’s how we are looking forward to our return to living after coronavirus is brought under control. I hope there will be a great party and that everyone will feel part of it, that no one will be left out. Jeremiah is also the prophet whose most famous quotation is probably “I will give you a hope and a future” which is in chapter 29 verse 11. I feel as though these things are on their way when I heard a couple of days ago about people from our church who were having their first inoculations for Covid-19. How wonderful it will be when we can get together without fear once more.

Then we read from Matthew’s gospel about the visit of the wise men. We haven’t yet heard this particular reading from the bible this season so I thought I’d use it today. It’s familiar to us all, from carols and Christmas cards etc. but perhaps something we don’t usually make much of is that these were not local people, they were from far away. They were not from Israel, or Judah but from the east, where precisely we don’t know. All we know is that they were people who were considered wise and they watched the stars, we assume they were rich because they were able to leave their usual places for a considerable time and bring extravagant gifts. But look at this, at the very beginning of the life of Jesus Christ, whilst still a baby in a Jewish city, people from other places and other religions were drawn to worship him and offer him precious gifts. We know from later parts of the gospel story that during Jesus’ ministry, other people too were drawn to him to worship him and that lives were changed utterly by contact with him.

And this is what we proclaim; that Jesus was God, that Jesus is still God and that people are still drawn to worship him. Whether they are returning from exile and planning a great party and that could be us when we come back

to our churches and are able to actually greet one another and sing (and dance if we feel so inclined!), or whether they are arriving from a different culture and by a different route, perhaps coming to believe for the very first time, they are still welcome to come to Jesus and we will greet them with open arms.

Today we come before God to say the words of our Covenant together. A service which Methodists have always shared together once a year, awesome words which we may find difficult or even impossible to say, but yet are a part of our worship, a part of our remembering just who and what God is. I hope that as well as the solemnity of these words, today we will take some time to remember the call of God to those exiles and how their return was marked with such celebration and worship and that our return might be similarly marked.

I have been given some cards about the Methodist Way of Life, which will be posted on to the members in my section, along with membership cards, I hope you will take some time to read them and perhaps we will have a series of Bible studies to look deeper into what makes a Methodist a Methodist. God bless you.

As far as we are able, with God's help :

Worship

We will **pray** daily. We will **worship** with others regularly. We will **look and listen for God** in Scripture, and the world.

Learning and Caring

We will **care for ourselves** and those around us. We will **learn more** about our faith. We will **practise** hospitality and generosity.

Service

We will **help people** in our communities and beyond. We will **care for creation** and all God's gifts. We will **challenge** injustice.

Evangelism

We will **speak** of the love of God. We will **live** in a way that **draws others to Jesus**. We will **share** our faith with others.

A time of prayer

Take time to sit quietly. Then say the Covenant Prayer aloud:

I am no longer my own but yours.

Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me,

in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none;

when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;

when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing

I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.

May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen

Song – Take this moment, time and space

Prayers of intercession

Pray for your church ... that it may be a faithful witness to God's love.

Pray for the church worldwide ...that in word and action it may help people to see God's glory

Pray for the leaders of nations... that they act justly and guide wisely.

Pray for those pushed to the margins of society ...that they and their gifts may be made welcome.

Pray for those in need...especially people we know

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father

Song – Lord for the years your love has kept and guided

Blessing