

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – May 17 2020 ('Easter 6')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 17 May, the fifth Sunday after Easter, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica and Olive and Mandy for joining in the preparation of this week's edition.

Call to Worship:

In Psalm 66 we read these words:

*Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard;
he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.*

*For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver.
You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.
You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance.*

Once again the psalmist is affirming faith in a God who is with us in the highs and the lows, the ups and downs, no matter how low the downs may take us. We are in a time of national crisis, no one is unaffected.

For the Jews of ancient Judah the key national calamity was to be exile and absorption into the Babylonian empire. Dominance of one nation by another is not restricted to those times. At the end of the nineteenth century, the country of Finland was essentially a province of Russia. The composer Sibelius composed this melody as part of a suite of music dedicated to his country, to its spirit, and looking forward to better days.

Musicⁱ – Theme from *Finlandia* by Jean Sibelius
Thomas Sondergard and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales

Prayers

I commend to you the whole of the piece *Finlandia*, which, after this excerpt, moves towards a conclusion which is hopeful, a little triumphal, and rather loud – so excuse me fading it out at that point, and perhaps also providing an ear worm for your day.

We bring our worship and our thoughts, our needs and our concerns to God in prayer; let us pray.

Lord God we cannot shut out from our worship the events of the days and the weeks that have gone, or our concerns for the days and weeks, months and even years to come. Nor should we.

As the *new normal* becomes the new cliché, help us not just to wait and see what the effects of government policy on our family, community and national life may be but also to help shape them. Help us to grasp opportunities to give a Christian input to each day and each encounter, by following the rules that Jesus gave and by sharing your love.

We offer you the sacrifice of our time. Time to listen and to concentrate, knowing that our usual connectedness with a congregation is fractured. Knowing that our usual responses through singing and praying simultaneously are muted by isolation. And yet

also knowing that you have promised your presence alongside us, no matter how small the gathering may be and that you have promised your response of love and care wherever your people turn in your direction.

We thank you for your gift to us of the world in all its amazing complexity. A gift made unconditionally, without our deserving, and so often taken for granted. Help us to use some of our time to enjoy as well as to use what you have given, to appreciate as well as to exploit. And help us to say thank you. Forgive us our self-obsession and ingratitude.

Forgive us our complaints and our moans. Forgive us any resentment of the pace and direction of government policy when unlike many we live in a land without fear of widespread violence or want, famine or drought. Forgive us our intolerance of lockdown measures when unlike many we can listen to or read these words in our own homes and in comfort. Forgive us when we add the absence of summer holiday prospects to a list of our sufferings when so many have suffered illness and death, separation and bereavement.

The gift of Christ was not just for Easter. His sacrifice was for all people and for all time. As we give you our attention now, bless us with understanding of what his life and death and resurrection can mean for each of us, and respond as we ought.

As he taught us, so we pray together

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in Heaven. Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Listen for the Word of God as Mandy brings us a reading from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, telling us about an episode during the ministry of Paul. He is in Athens.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Acts 17.22-31

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: 'People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

²⁴ 'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. ²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ²⁸ "For in him we live and move and have our being." As some of your own poets have said, "We are his offspring."

²⁹ 'Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

³¹ For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.'

Reflection (1)

Paul stands up in what this version of the Bible calls the 'meeting of the Areopagus'. Some other translations dodge the issue and the tricky word and just mention the gathering of the Athens legislature in some way. But the Areopagus was an outcrop of rock near the Acropolis in Athens, and it was adopted as a venue for a kind of local parliament and law tribunals. By the time of Paul's visit and in a city under Roman rule, the powers of the assembly were limited. But it would still be the place to inform and challenge the top thinkers, movers and shakers of the city, and Paul has chosen both his audience and his arguments well. I am not sure that the text of the Book of Acts does justice to the effects of Paul quoting back at the Greeks the words of their philosophers Epimenides and Aratus.

But these were members of the élite of a community used to thinking and open – at least some of the time – to having their thinking challenged. No doubt they had their share of cranks and crackpots turn up with completely wacky ideas, but it sounds like Paul's theme – the whole world's origin in God and the universality of God's love and care – found a reasonable response.

At the moment, and I have to admit I have been part of it, the Church is doing quite a lot of looking after itself. I have a regular meeting online with clergy across our Area and sometimes the conversation has been *entirely* about the clever software or equipment being used to reproduce worship and convey it to our members. And by the time half an hour has gone by in discussion of the different merits of Zoom and FaceTime, podcasts and YouTube, my conscience has been pricked by whether we ought to turn from things to people, and from inside the church to outside.

Luckily we have examples from our own churches and others of people whose energy has been very much directed outside the church walls or in these days their house walls. Those volunteering to help or befriend the shielded vulnerable elderly or others who cannot leave their homes at all. Those making and distributing cakes and treats to key workers by way of encouragement and thank you.

But as we begin to be encouraged by our denomination to start looking at what the strategy will be for emerging from lockdown into the *new normal* (I'm getting tired of that phrase already, but it says it right), we should learn from Paul.

I am a big fan of any authoritative word from the early Church which encourages us to be inclusive. By that I mean words that encourage us to accept that there are people outside our own church organization and perhaps outside any church organization who are nevertheless being true to the spirit of God's purpose for his creation and the commandment of Jesus that we love one another.

Might these people doing good in the world belong to other faiths? Undoubtedly – I have seen stories in the press in recent days about the charitable activities of British Muslims and Sikhs. When our members at Foleshill Road advertised for support for the local community supermarket which was robbed of its stock 10 days ago, their actions were echoed by other faith bodies further down the road.

How do we reconcile the different sayings of Jesus, on the one hand that no one comes to the Father but through him, the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14), and on the other hand that some will be mystified at his invitation at the end of all things (in Matthew 25):

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Some do God’s work unawares. And that is Gospel truth.

I would like to be as brave as Paul but I am not. If I were, I would be standing on the steps of the Council House saying to all people, of all backgrounds, the Way is open. Jesus the Way is open. God’s welcome into the Kingdom is awaiting those who love their neighbour. But how wonderful to be able to know Jesus and the foundation of our faith now, and to join in spreading that Good News.

I’m not brave. But what I can do and hope to do is to affirm the good work being done by any and all, **of all backgrounds**, to help others, affirm key workers, support the sick and comfort the grieving, give of their relative plenty to those who have less. To love their neighbours. As Paul affirmed, in God we all live and move and have our being. If some remain ignorant of this, then so much more reason for us to turn away from YouTube and Zoom and look out to the world.

Music: *Carillon* (excerpt) recorded by Sky on their debut album, *Sky*.

Listen for the Word of God in our Gospel reading. Olive is reading for us from the Good News Translation.

Scripture: John 14.15-21

¹⁵“If you love me, you will obey my commandments. ¹⁶I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, who will stay with you forever. ¹⁷He is the Spirit, who reveals the truth about God. The world cannot receive him, because it cannot see him or know him. But you know him, because he remains with you and is^[a] in you.

¹⁸“When I go, you will not be left all alone; I will come back to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will see me no more, but you will see me; and because I live, you also will live.

²⁰When that day comes, you will know that I am in my Father and that you are in me, just as I am in you.

²¹“Those who accept my commandments and obey them are the ones who love me. My Father will love those who love me; I too will love them and reveal myself to them.”

Reflection (2)

I broke off while putting together this podcast to have even more fun and do a different recording. I created and submitted to the BBC a recording of myself singing the bass line from Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus. If they use it then my voice will be part of an online choir singing for the Radio 4 evening service next Thursday – Ascension Day. I won’t insist that you listen to it, though I may give you the Hallelujah Chorus next week!

Ascension Day is near. It is a sign that we are moving on in the Gospel story – approaching its end. The different writers string it out beyond the resurrection in different

ways, with different inputs to the cumulative story of how Jesus met his disciples after he rose.

The reading that Olive brought us comes from the long conversation Jesus had with his disciples at the time of the Last Supper in the account by the Gospel writer John. This always seems like Jesus taking his last opportunity to drive home some key messages about himself and his nature, his relationship with God. But he is also being reassuring – he is making a promise that whatever happens these men will not be on their own as they try to deal with everything that life throws at them in the after-Jesus days.

They will be given strength to endure and will be inspired as to what to say if – not if, when - they are in sticky situations. They may fall away but they will become part of the work to be done on earth on God's behalf, testifying to what they suddenly realise is true, that God truly could love the world so much that his Son came and died as a sacrifice for all, to give potential to all, to be reconciled to God.

And now we have mention at last of the Holy Spirit. The helper, the enabler, the glue keeping everything together and the motive force keeping it moving.

you will know that I am in my Father and that you are in me, just as I am in you.

As a society we are attracted by wholeness. There is a wholeness about Jesus' description of the interconnectedness of God and his Son, his Son and his followers. No division, no interruption, no abandoning of any part by any other.

There are still two weeks to go before our annual appreciation of the language and drama surrounding the Day of Pentecost, but here is a sneak preview of what it will entail. It will be the scene once again of the transformation of such a man as Peter into the Rock on which the Church was founded. And to whom the promise was given – the promise of a job to do and the resources to do it. This promise to his listeners, to the following generations and as Acts 2 says, to all who are far off.

That is us. That remains our task. The Spirit remains our resource, our Helper.

Amen

Before and around our prayers for the Church and the world today, a sung prayer that has been around for a long time – *Dona nobis pacem in terra, dona nobis pacem domine*: 'Give us peace on earth; give us peace, Lord.' Sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community and taken from their album *Heaven shall not wait*.

Music: *Dona nobis pacem in terra*

Prayers of Intercession

Lord, we pray for all who need peace in your world today.

We pray for key workers in hospitals, care homes, and other settings, especially those who put their own health at risk in order to care for others. We know that some have the privilege and the responsibility to be the last people to speak to those who are dying, and we pray for them to find the right words, the right gestures, to convey your **peace** to others even as they struggle themselves.

Dona nobis pacem in terra...

We pray for those in difficult lockdown situations, parted from people they love, or trapped with people who threaten their physical, or emotional wellbeing. We pray for parents longing to hug their children and grandchildren; couples who do not live together and longing to be reunited; people who live alone and longing for company. And we pray for people obliged to be with an abusive partner or parent. We pray for those in cramped or overcrowded homes, or without gardens or access to open space. And in the turmoil of new rules and new guidance, we pray that every one of us should work out what we should or should not do now. Grant us your **peace**.

Dona nobis pacem in terra...

We pray for people in parts of the world where the threat of the virus is added to the threats caused by war, by famine, or by lack of development. We think of those living in cramped refugee camps around the world, where social distancing is impossible and health services are limited. And we think of those whose income has failed and for whom there is no welfare state and no government bailout.

Dona nobis pacem in terra...

We pray for all people of faith, for whom lockdown has prevented some forms of religious observance from being followed. For churches finding new ways of worshipping but missing the human contact and practical acts that mean so much. For the bereaved, prevented from holding funerals in the usual way and finding the grieving process hard. For couples obliged to postpone their weddings and new families their baptisms. We think of Muslims having their observance of Ramadan disrupted, just as we had a disrupted Easter. And we think of those parts of the Christian church where the absence of Holy Communion is found particularly difficult.

Dona nobis pacem in terra...

Lord, in troubled times, we ask you to grant your **peace** to all your children,

Dona nobis pacem in terra – give us peace in our world.

Amen.

Sibelius' tune was enrolled for a 19th-century hymn of assurance, translated from an earlier German source: *Be still, my soul*.

Hymn *Be still, my soul*
[Choir of Trinity College, University of Melbourne]

Be still my soul: the Lord is on your side;
bear patiently the cross of grief and pain;
leave to your God to order and provide;
in every change he faithful will remain.
Be still my soul: your best, your heavenly Friend
through thorny ways leads to a joyful end

Be still my soul: the hour is hastening on
when we shall be forever with the Lord,
when disappointment, grief and fear are gone,
sorrow forgotten, love's pure joy restored.
Be still my soul: when change and tears are past,

all safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Words by Katharina von Schlegel (b1697), translated Jane L Borthwick (1813-1897)

Blessing

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always

Amen

Music: *Carillon* (complete) recorded by Sky on their debut album, *Sky*.

The theme from *Finlandia* by Sibelius was taken from the recording by the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, conducted by Thomas Sondergard.

Be still, my soul was sung by the Choir of Trinity College, University of Melbourne and is taken from the album *50 Best-loved Hymns*

Carillon was performed by Sky (John Williams, Herbie Flowers, Kevin Peek, Tristan Fry and Francis Monkman) on their first album, *Sky*.

ⁱ All music included in this podcast is made available for download under the terms of the PRS for Music Limited Online Music Licence number LE-0019067

ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition (Acts) and the Good News Translation (John)