

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – June 21 2020 ('Third after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for the 21 June, the third Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

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

Music¹ – *Gabriel's Oboe* by Ennio Morricone
from the soundtrack to the film *The Mission*

Call to Worship: Ecclesiastes 3.1-8

*There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens:*

- ² *a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,*
- ³ *a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,*
- ⁴ *a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,*
- ⁵ *a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing,*
- ⁶ *a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,*
- ⁷ *a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,*
- ⁸ *a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.*

Here is a song from the musical, *Godspell*. It is a lament from those far from home who despair of being able to worship God in a strange place:

The song reproduces the words of Psalm 137, verses 2-4, as in the Revised Standard Version of the Bible:

- ² *On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.*
- ³ *For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*
- ⁴ *How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?*

Music – *On the Willows*, from *Godspell*. Performed by Steve Reinhardt, Richard LaBonte, Jesse Cutler and the Godspell Band, taken from the Original Cast Recording. Music by Stephen Schwartz, Steven Reinhardt & Ricky Shutter

Prayers

We gather our thoughts, and offer our prayers to God:

Loving God, our heavenly Father. We find ourselves in a strange place, in a foreign place. Foreign, unfamiliar. Sometimes it is as if we don't speak the language. We have to learn new habits and obey rules we didn't have in the old place.

But now we set aside some time for you. And as we... worship, in this strange way, we yearn for some of the old ways to be available to us again. Gathering in our churches, special buildings to us even though each has its problems and limitations. Singing together, a special way to respond to you even though our output never quite sounds like the downloads of our favourite hymns and songs. And most of all meeting as a congregation, sharing space with special people we may have known for decades, even though sometimes it is only in the church and on church occasions that we meet.

The writer of Ecclesiastes felt his life was mapped out for him to a degree that didn't allow for choice or real purpose. We are used to having freedom, and real choices. It resonates with us in these days that he identified times to embrace and to refrain from embracing. If this is our time to be isolated, our time to weep and mourn, our time to be apart from friends and family for weeks – our time to refrain from embracing - we pray that you will ease our path towards days of renewed joy and laughter, of meeting and of embracing.

May our worship still be valid, a true response to your goodness and greatness. And even in a strange land may we find ways to express our thankfulness and praise for who you are and what you do for your whole Creation.

Forgive us when we doubt. When we stop trying. When we neglect chances to help others and retreat into self-centredness. Inspire us by your Spirit to look for the right path forward, which we know well lies in taking on board the good news of your Son, his teaching and his example.

In the name of Jesus Christ we offer you our prayers, and join in the words he taught his disciples:

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.

Reflection (1)

For me, it's been a couple of weeks of online gatherings. To begin with the most recent, this year's Synod 'Summer School' for ministers and church leaders was changed from its usual residential format – which I wouldn't have been at – to three mornings' get-together

using the 'Zoom' software, which lets everyone see everyone else using their webcams and allows the session leaders to split those gathered into virtual meeting rooms for chat in smaller numbers.

The technology worked most of the time and it was good to see folk I had not been with for some time. These days I know by sight and have met at some time or other a large proportion of the URC church leaders from across the West Midlands. In one or two cases I helped the church decide whether or not they should be accepted for training, which makes me feel old.

It was odd to be – even in a virtual sense – with so many people. Just thirty-five or so actually, but still a mass of faces gathered with one purpose, and not something I had done on this scale in the last three months. The 22nd of this month marks three months since our church buildings ceased to be used for corporate worship and our exile-at-home began.

Once again – and I know I have made this point before – it feels like an exile in the biblical sense and it feels appropriate to refer to the experience of the Jews of ancient times. As well as sadness and wistfulness in their yearning for the old, former worship experience, there was anger and resentment. Not so much towards God, although the question 'why?' was sometimes on their lips. But towards their captors, those responsible for the immediate situation. Our Psalm 137, although sad, seems so innocuous and can even be jaunty in the treatment by the group Boney M which came out in 1978, *By the Rivers of Babylon* – would you believe one of the top ten best-selling singles in the UK? But this psalm concludes with a curse on the oppressors and a wish that their children may come to a violent end.

We may not be that angry, but there is plenty of anger around, today and in the last three months. And added to this of course the renewed raised consciousness about racism in just the last three weeks, Black Lives Matter. There is much to think about, much to witness to, though limited opportunities to do it.

I cannot say I have any magic wand to wave, but would affirm the truth that has sustained those worshipping or wanting to worship or yearning to worship God for the last two and a half thousand years and more, since the time of the Babylonian exile. God is present even when you don't see him, even when you don't sense him, even when you think you are forsaken. Psalm 22 – *My God, why have you forsaken me?* Echoed by Jesus on the cross. A rhetorical question. But the answer, if God were to speak from the clouds: *I have not forsaken you. My Son, My people. My Creation.*

Remember, as you yearn for the familiar, for your favourite seat in your favourite row, for the notices and the offering, the hymns and the prayers, even just the chance to say 'Amen' in company... While this is something we need or think we do, what God requires is different, what God requires is not tied or even necessarily linked to our buildings and institutions. Accept and rejoice in whatever worship might be, for, as the prophet Micah [6.8] puts it: *what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* Everything else should come from that.

Be prepared for questions arising as we emerge from this time, as to what we should strain and strive to retain and what we might, after due thought, jettison of our former patterns of church life and worship. Also what we should be trying to retain of the new forms of church that have emerged in the last three months and which are refined or added to in whatever time it takes to get back in our buildings.

Nevertheless, it will be good to come to the point when, in the words of one more Psalm [122], we can join together in saying, *I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'*

A fortnight ago Erica and I joined with hundreds of others in an online service to welcome a new leader to the Iona Community. It was almost a shock to see many screens full of faces gathered with this common purpose of worship. As part of that service we heard this new song, which has been written by John Bell with the current crisis in mind. It speaks to our situation now and articulates the hopes of many of us. I was particularly taken with the use of the words *faith, hope and love* in the last verse, particularly resonant with our Foleshill Road congregation, whose church redevelopment project has adopted *Faith, Hope and Love* as its title.

Music: *We will meet*, a new song by John L Bell, sung by Alison Adam based on a Norwegian text by Hans-Olav Moerk
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We will meet; when the danger is over,
we will meet when the sad days are done;
we will meet sitting closely together
and be glad our tomorrow has come.

We will join to give thanks and sing gladly,
we will join to break bread and share wine;
and the peace that we pass to each other
will be more than a casual sign.

So let's make with each other a promise
that when all we've come through is behind,
we will share what we missed and find meaning
in the things that once troubled our mind.

Until then may we always discover
faith and love to determine our way.
That's our hope and God's will and our calling
for our lives and for ev'ry new day.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Matthew 10.24-39

²⁴ "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Be-el'zebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.

²⁶ "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops. ²⁸ And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. ³⁰ But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. ³² So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; ³³ but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.

³⁴ "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶ and a man's foes will be those of his own household. ³⁷ He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me;

and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me;³⁸ and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.³⁹ He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.

Reflection (2)

Jesus tells his disciples not to be afraid. In Matthew chapter ten he does it twice, in verse 26 and then again in verse 28. Do not be afraid. Do not fear.

To be honest, they had plenty to be afraid about.

Most scholars will tell you that Matthew's gospel was written towards the end of the first century. Opinions vary between the years of 60 and 90 AD, and most will say that it happened after 70 AD. This is because in that year, in the year 70, a great calamity came on the Jewish nation. Several years of revolt under the Emperors Nero and Vespasian came to a head, and the future Emperor Titus more or less totally destroyed the city and its temple. He made a circle of crosses around the city and crucified all who tried to escape.

The disciples had that ahead of them and also the persecution of the early church.

By the time Matthew's Gospel was written down, there had been a wave of reaction against the church - first of all from the Jewish authorities. They had influence in Jerusalem and wherever the Jewish faith was strong. During the period after the death of Jesus when the Jews still had a high degree of self-rule in their homeland there was an active suppression of the church.

Then the Romans got going. Real persecution of the Church went on, off and on and at various levels, for the next three hundred years.

Within the lifetime of these disciples the church they founded saw this succession of challenges. It was not easy being a Christian.

It is not easy being a Christian today either, though to be honest in this country you might reasonably say that our biggest challenge is apathy rather than any threat of violence, arrest, torture or death.

But Jesus knew, I am sure, the scale of what awaited his followers in the first century. And yet he says, "Do not be afraid"! The worst of it was that even members of individual families might chose some to follow the way of Jesus and others to cling on to the original Jewish faith of their ancestors. Oddly Jesus says that even this is part of his purpose.

'Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'

And these people are supposed not to be afraid. How can that be? The answer to all this lies in something very big and in something very small.

The very big thing is the context in which this is going on. For Jesus is talking about a world in which the problems the disciples come up against are small, compared to the cosmic sweep of God's power in time and space. There will come a time when all shall be known and the risks that you might run at the final judgement are far worse than anything you might suffer now. Risks of hell, quite explicitly stated. It's an old fashioned thing to talk about now, but it is the way people thought then and one way we can describe now a life,

or death without God. But it is a life or death of our choosing. For God will never ever stop making himself and his love available to us.

And that's where we come to the small thing. The sparrows of verse 29. Jesus tells us that even the smallest bird he could think of is an object of God's love. Even the hairs on our heads (and some of us have more of those than others) are a symbol of how detailed, painstaking and complete God's love is.

Proof again that our God is so big that there is enough God for everyone. There is enough God for you and me and him and her and everyone you can think of and everyone you can't think of and everyone there has ever been and everyone there will ever be.

And then we start on the sparrows. And all creatures and all living things.

How great thou art, indeed.

It might not cure things straight away, to say "don't be afraid". But it remains as true for us as it was for the disciples. God is there for you even (and maybe this is the biggest thing of all) if you don't think he is your God. That's how big he is.

Don't be afraid. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord God, we pray once again today for all who are afraid ...

Afraid of continuing isolation;
afraid of breaking isolation and rejoining community;
afraid of the future.

We thank you for the potential some now have to meet with more of those they love but pray for all who remain separated. Those whose geographical location means they cannot yet take advantage of rule changes, and those whose contacts have had to make hard choices as to who shall share their bubble.

We pray for those who are still unwell, those who are still becoming unwell. Key workers whose profile may slip from the headlines but who are still the carers they were, taking the risks they have been taking, these many weeks. The focus moves on, but the work remains.

Lord, in a world where no two nations, no two communities and no two families have exactly the same experience, show us how to build on our common purposes and deal with the differences between us, affirming with your Gospel that all lives matter. We pray for those seeking to build on the publicity and momentum of the *Black Lives Matter* movement to bring positive change to people's attitudes and circumstances. Help us to live our declared faith that all are equal in your sight.

We pray for the Church, looking for opportunities to remain active as the body of Christ while constrained, locked down and locked out of its buildings. Bless us with inspiration to look for new channels to connect to, to irrigate the world with your love and look to a harvest of peace and justice for all.

Lord, we offer you all of us, even our fear. Take us as we are and show us how to change.

Amen

A hymn seeking strength.

Hymn *Father, hear the prayer we offer*
[Choir of Gloucester Cathedral, from *Complete English Hymnal, Vol 4*]

*Father, hear the prayer we offer:
not for ease that prayer shall be,
but for strength that we may ever
live our lives courageously.*

*Not for ever by still waters
would we idly rest and stay;
but would smite the living fountains
from the rocks along our way.*

*Not for ever in green pastures
do we ask our way to be;
but the steep and rugged pathway
may we tread rejoicingly.*

*Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.*

Words by Love M W Willis (1824 – 1908)

Blessing

May God who reassured the exiles, inspired the prophets and emboldened the disciples grant us gifts of courage and faith through the Holy Spirit.

And may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be with us all today and for ever. Amen

Music: *Theme from the film, Schindler's List* by John Williams
performed by Maxim Vengerov on violin, Ian Brown on Piano
from the album, *Encore*

Thank you for listening to our podcast. [on <https://revdbill.uk>]

Credits

Gabriel's Oboe by Ennio Morricone, taken from the soundtrack album of the film *The Mission*.

On the Willows, from *Godspell*. Performed by Steve Reinhardt, Richard LaBonte, Jesse Cutler and the Godspell Band, taken from the Original Cast Recording. Music by Stephen Schwartz, Steven Reinhardt & Ricky Shutter

We will meet, a new song by John L Bell, based on a Norwegian text by Hans-Olav Moerk, and sung by Alison Adam – this recording was a private communication by the singer.

Father, hear the prayer we offer was sung by the Choir of Gloucester Cathedral, taken from their album *Complete English Hymnal, Vol 4*

And our closing music was the theme from the film *Schindler's List*, music by John Williams and played by Maxim Vengerov accompanied by Ian Brown, from their album *Encore*.

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