

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 5 July 2020 ('Fifth after Pentecost')

Hello and welcome to a podcast for and from the North Coventry Group of United Reformed Churches. This has been prepared for 5 July, the fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica, Janet and Elliot for their contributions.

Music¹ – *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis (excerpt)*
by Ralph Vaughan-Williams
performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra,
conducted by Sir Roger Norrington

In a circular email last weekend I mentioned Psalm 121 and had appreciative feedback from various people for whom this psalm is a particular favourite. We used a musical setting of this several weeks ago, that Erica and I sang ourselves. Here it is again, by way of call to worship, in a setting by John Bell, this time sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group.

Call to Worship: Psalm 121, in a setting by John L Bell, sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community and taken from the album *Psalms of patience, protest and praise*. © 1993 The Iona Community, reproduced by permission.

*Lifting my eyes up to the hills,
where shall I seek for aid?*
Your help comes only from the Lord
who earth and heaven made.

The Lord who guards you never sleeps,
nor will he let you fall;
no slumber drowns Israel's God,
guardian of each and all.

God is your guardian, God your shade,
protector of your right.
By day the sun shall hurt you none,
nor shall the moon by night.

The Lord shall shield you from all harm
and safely guard your soul.
Forever, as you come and go,
God's love shall keep you whole.

Prayers

Lord, we lift *our* eyes to the hills, to the skies, we look at the news on television, we read it on paper or on devices. We listen to the radio and ask, where is help going to come from? Help for the world, help for our country, help for us as individuals? Help for the church to resume its role as the Body of Christ?

In this time labelled as emergence from lockdown for some, but for most of us still more waiting than doing, we come once again to read or to listen to words of worship. Help us to make our worship meaningful, wherever we are, who ever we are with, whoever we are missing. Regularly we have agreed that the Church is about people and not about buildings. Now we have to live up to that, week by week.

Some things will never change and don't depend on a venue, or on furnishings and all the apparatus of our traditions. And although we would rather our *Amen* were lost in the crowd, our singing drowned out by others we believe do it better than us, help us to accept the worth of our solitary voices. For we know that they are joined with the voices of your people all the world round in response to your greatness and your love.

For you are great – your work in Creation testifies to your indescribable, immeasurable power. And you are loving – the sacrifice of your Son to atone for sins and shortcomings that were never his testifies to how far you are prepared to come to meet us, to welcome us and bring us home.

With the psalmist, may we accept the assurance that you watch over every part of our lives – our coming and going, our interactions and our isolation – and always will. Forgive us when we doubt, when we become frustrated, when we look to the hills for help when you are beside us, and helping.

We offer this worship and our prayers to you in Jesus' name, and as he taught us 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.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Zechariah 9:9-12

⁹ Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

¹⁰ I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the war-horses from Jerusalem,
and the battle-bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

¹¹ As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.

¹² Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope;
even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

¹⁶ 'To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others:

¹⁷ “We played the pipe for you,
and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge,
and you did not mourn.”

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon.” ¹⁹ The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.’

²⁵ At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

²⁷ ‘All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸ ‘Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’

Reflection (1)

‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me’. Not true. Words can be hurtful and they may be used to wound.

I hope that you don't spend your life listening to people calling you names, but at some time in all of our lives it will have happened. I suspect it is one of these things that can be quite common behaviour in children and young people, perhaps because they lack the vocabulary to take an argument beyond the point where people resort to name calling. But silly little insults, wrapped up in comments about the way people look or behave, as I say sadly common in arguing children but something we usually grow out of. Unless you are the current US president addressing his election rival as "Sleepy Joe" just as he adopted 'Crooked Hilary' for Mr Biden's predecessor.

Sometimes we are called more positive things that we don't deserve. In my time, if I have been seen in my clerical shirt about the place, someone will call me "Father", when they have made an assumption about my church background. Good morning Father.. come in, Father. On rare occasions, “bless me, Father”. At work, and sometimes I think it's just someone trying to win favour by a compliment, I sometimes used to get an email, Dear Dr Young...

Today's readings are both (in a sense) about name-calling. And I will get back to that, but maybe you'll have wondered what was going on when you heard our Zechariah reading, having the Old Testament prediction of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem read at this time of year! But it's no mistake.

"Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. "

This is a prophecy about hope, it's a prophecy of rescue, it's a prophecy of peace and it's a prophecy of the coming rule of God. Zechariah was active in the reign of Darius the Great, the Persian Emperor who reigned over something like 40% of the world's

population in the years around 500BC. Darius allowed the return of exiles and the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Zechariah had a positive message to bring.

This passage is about all of these things but to come back to my first point I say this is also a reading evoking name-calling because of the Gospel parallel. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem, as recorded for example in Matthew, after a repeat of Zechariah's prophecy:

They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David!' 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

Jesus is called the name that Matthew would emphasise for his Jewish audience. Hosannas to the **Son of David**. The son, the heir, the one who deserves to be in charge. A positive name.

The Zechariah passage for some of us also evokes music – there is an aria from Handel's *Messiah* that his librettist puts next to the Christmas story, never mind the Easter one. But whenever you bring it to mind, it is a positive message. And this is positive music, also rather a workout for the singer...

Music: *Rejoice greatly*. Aria from *Messiah* by George Frederick Handel (excerpt) sung by Judith Nelson, with the Academy of Ancient Music conducted by Christopher Hogwood

Reflection (2)

There is other name-calling in the Gospel passage from earlier in Matthew, that Janet read. This time not so complimentary.

You'll recall that Jews went to see John the Baptist. They went out into the wilderness to see John, perhaps hoping for entertainment coupled with the prophetic message, but ended up... underwhelmed.

And ended up calling John names. He's mad. He has a devil in him. And why? Because he is speaking truth to power and calmly leading the life of a hermit with a modest and slightly odd diet. They don't get him; they don't "get" his message. So they react, by name calling. By giving him this **label**, if you like. Mad. Possessed.

They called John the Baptist names and for almost an exactly **opposite** reason they called Jesus names; it's almost the inverse of the reaction to John the Baptist when Jesus was challenged **for** eating and drinking, in company not in the desert.

Jesus describes this: *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."* This very accusation had been made when Jesus was eating with his disciple Matthew at his house.

This time the abuse comes not from the people embracing something new and then not understanding but more from them only looking superficially at what Jesus was doing, not probing the meaning. Not taking the time to get over first impressions, shooting from the hip.

I suspect we've all done that, too, and only allowed a limited time for something new to take root before moving on. I have done it in my time with new fashions, new music,

new technologies and new ideas. Some are probably lost to me for good but in other cases I owe much to other people that have shown me what I was missing, made me think again.

Jesus "tops and tails" the Gospel passage with examples of children. First we see how the games they play in the public spaces can lead to argument, conflict:

Matthew 11:17 "We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

This can be interpreted as two groups of kids wanting different scenarios for their playtime. The first group wanting to play at weddings and producing wedding music to go with that notion. The others don't play along but go to the other extreme out of what my mother would call sheer cussedness. *We sang a dirge and you did not mourn.* An odd playtime, but perhaps an example of what *playing at families* meant in first century Palestine. Squabbling and name calling, which frankly was the way the adults were behaving about John and Jesus.

But then, at the other end of the passage the way that children can take to new things is brought into play.

Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.

Children might become petulant when their friends don't want to play their chosen game, but they get over it. They are less inclined to pre-judge something than adults, so literally have less prejudice. This open mind can lead to that same mind being filled with good things. The adult's assumption that there is nothing good to be gained, no new knowledge to be extracted, nothing worthwhile to be experienced means that they sit out the game, tune out of the discussion, or as I said before, just don't get it.

And might react with scorn and name calling, like children, because it's all they can think of to do.

The balance of our passage reveals the depth and the breadth of Jesus' love and power

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

It is a simple message, when you come down to it. It's not difficult. The ideas are simple. Jesus seems to spend a lot of his life putting forward simple ideas and boiled-down, back-to-basics rules that people ought to be able to understand, but they bring along their own rules, which get in the way.

Jesus is putting forward the basics, from which all else come, a simple burden with big implications, and based on loving as you are loved, reflecting God's goodness to you by being good to others.

It is a strange burden that is given you that makes all the rest of your loads lighter. But I know, for I rely on it, what a relief it can be to realise there is always the simple, the basic rule, Law, whatever you want to call it, given by Jesus, to go back to, to help work out next steps.

The 'burden' that God lays upon us is not intended to break us but to bring relief. Never the last straw but one we can grasp at again and again knowing it will not let us down.

Prayers of Intercession

We offer our prayers to God for the Church and the world.

Father God

We pray for all who are burdened, and struggling with the loads they bear.

We pray for people in authority, charged with making choices on behalf of others. We know it is all too easy to be discontent and critical of decisions that are made, so we pray both for wisdom and humility in the decision makers, and for us, the grace to know when to accept decisions we do not think are right. Be with those trying to find words to influence and to caution. Bless those both appointed and elected to advise and to decide.

We pray for people burdened by fears for the future. For those losing their jobs, and fearful of the risk of mass unemployment ahead. For those disabled by the lockdown and fearful of venturing out. For those suffering ill health and needing care and treatment. We pray for courage to face an uncertain future, and for the strength to share our fears and tackle them together.

In a time when so many have died we pray for those who bear the burden of grief. Whether or not their loss is as a result of the virus it is real, and may be overwhelming. Wherever their loved one died, the process of grieving and saying goodbye has been partial and incomplete, bereft of the comfort of touch and the presence of those who would have been there. Lord, give to them peace as they wait and hope for a future in which lives can be properly remembered and celebrated.

We pray for those burdened by the expectations of others. We think of church leaders, balancing the hopes and wishes of church communities with the need to ensure the safety of all and the integrity of worship. Once again we ask your guidance and inspiration as we debate which of our former activities should be resumed or relinquished, and which new activities are right to retain. Help us to lay aside the burden of decades or even generations of habit, as we consider what is right for the future. Help us to remember that we are the Body of Christ, and to break free of the limitations of our calendars and our buildings if that is what will help to make your kingdom come.

Lord we know we risk thinking too much of ourselves and our own situations in this time. But we ask for grace to become the Body of Christ once again, each of us with a part to play in sharing the burdens of the world, even as you are always there to share ours.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen

A hymn asking for guidance, with Old Testament allusions and Welsh voices. *Guide me, O thou Great Jehovah.*

Hymn *Guide me, O thou great Jehovah*
 sung by the Treorchy Male Voice Choir
 from the album *Welsh Male Voice Choir Tradition*

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
hold me with thy powerful hand:
bread of heaven,
feed me now and evermore.

Open thou the crystal fountain,
whence the healing stream doth flow;
let the fiery, cloudy pillar
lead me all my journey through:
strong deliverer,
be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
bid my anxious fears subside;
death of death, and hell's destruction,
land me safe on Canaan's side:
songs of praises,
I will ever give to thee.

Blessing

May our God, great Jehovah, great Redeemer, Father, Creator and Lord, guide us through this troubled and strange time and bring us in the end to his kingdom, where his will is truly done.

.....

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: *Brideshead Revisited - Main Theme*
 composed by Geoffrey Burgon
 taken from the soundtrack album, *Brideshead Revisited*

Thank you for listening to our podcast. [on <https://revdbill.uk>] Feedback and comments are always welcome.

Credits

The excerpt from *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis*, by Ralph Vaughan-Williams, was performed by the London Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Sir Roger Norrington.

Lifting my eyes up to the hills, a version of Psalm 121 written and composed by John L Bell, and sung by the Wild Goose Worship Group of the Iona Community was taken from their album *Psalms of patience, protest and praise*.

Part of the aria *Rejoice greatly*, from *Messiah* by George Frederick Handel, was sung by Judith Nelson, with the Academy of Ancient Music, conducted by Christopher Hogwood.

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah was sung by the Treorchy Male Voice Choir and taken from their album *Welsh Male Voice Choir Tradition*.

And finally the *Main Theme* from the television serial *Brideshead Revisited*, composed by Geoffrey Burgon, was taken from the soundtrack album, *Brideshead Revisited*.

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ⁱⁱ Bible quotations are all taken from the New International Version, Anglicised Edition