

## A Podcast for North Coventry Group – August 23 2020 ('Twelfth 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 23 August, the twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica, Janet and Tasha for their help in preparing this week's edition.

We prepare to reflect on God, on his relationship with his ancient people and the gift of his Son, our role in bringing news of Jesus to the world. First, listen to a peaceful tune played by Julian Lloyd-Webber.

**Introductory Music<sup>i</sup>** – *Arioso (Adagio in G)* from Cantata BWV 156 by J S Bach arranged by Julian Lloyd Webber and played by Julian Lloyd Webber and John Lenehan, from their album *Cello Song*

**Call to Worship:** Words from Psalm 138

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart;  
before the gods I sing your praise;  
I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O LORD, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the LORD, for great is the glory of the LORD.

A hymn in which we praise all aspects of our God – Thou, whose almighty Word.

**Hymn:** *Thou whose almighty Word*, sung by the Choir of Norwich Cathedral from the album *Complete New English Hymnal, Volume 5*

Thou whose almighty word  
chaos and darkness heard  
and took their flight;  
hear us, we humbly pray,  
and where the gospel day  
sheds not its glorious ray  
let there be light!

Spirit of truth and love,  
lifegiving, holy Dove,  
speed forth thy flight;  
move o'er the waters' face,  
bearing the lamp of grace,  
and in earth's darkest place  
let there be light!

Thou who didst come to bring  
on thy redeeming wing  
healing and sight,  
health to the sick in mind,  
sight to the inly blind,  
O now to all mankind  
let there be light!

Blessed and holy Three,  
glorious Trinity,  
Wisdom, Love, Might,  
boundless as ocean's tide  
rolling in fullest pride,  
through the world, far and wide,  
let there be light!

## Prayers

Let us pray

Lord, we gather to worship you, well aware that this is not how we would want to be. Our response to you is muted by regulation. Our love for our neighbours must be shown in leaving a distance and not in offering touch. Our ability to be advocates for you in the world is constrained by lockdown limitations.

And yet we are the same people and you are our God. Since before history and before time itself you have cared. Since ancient peoples first thought of words to describe you, you have been beyond our description.

But we read in the Psalms, in the books of the Law and the prophets how your people trusted in you to deliver them. We and our predecessors in the Christian faith have known enough about you to trust you. Have loved you enough to regret bitterly not being able to give of our best in service and in worship.

With the psalmist we give thanks to your name for your steadfast love. We lift our eyes to look for help. Show us where you are. Not in the hills but in all things. Not just in those appointed or ordained to lead but in all people. Not just in the good times but alongside us in all we do and whenever we do it.

Forgive us when we despair, when we are frustrated and impatient. Show us your way. Remind us of your care. Inspire us to imitate Christ in all we do.

In his name we pray and we join together in the words he taught:

### 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.*

**Scripture<sup>ii</sup>:** Exodus 1.8-2.10

<sup>1.8</sup> Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

<sup>9</sup> He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

<sup>10</sup> Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

<sup>11</sup> Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.

<sup>12</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.

<sup>13</sup> The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites,

<sup>14</sup> and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

<sup>15</sup> The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah,

<sup>16</sup> "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live."

<sup>17</sup> But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live.

<sup>18</sup> So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?"

<sup>19</sup> The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them."

<sup>20</sup> So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong.

<sup>21</sup> And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

<sup>22</sup> Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

<sup>2.1</sup> Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

<sup>2</sup> The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

<sup>3</sup> When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river.

<sup>4</sup> His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

<sup>5</sup> The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it.

<sup>6</sup> When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said.

<sup>7</sup> Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

<sup>8</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother.

<sup>9</sup> Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

<sup>10</sup> When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

**Scripture:** Matthew 16:13-20

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

<sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

<sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

<sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

<sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

<sup>18</sup> And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

<sup>20</sup> Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## Reflection (1)

When the slowest boy in the form suddenly comes up with the right answer, people can have one of a number of reactions. They can think that perhaps the law of averages has finally borne fruit, and the chap had to be right sometime. They can think that it is just a fluke, and on the “infinite number of monkeys” principle there can sometimes be an unintended right answer. This was certainly my own reaction when one or two of my engineers at work actually used to use an apostrophe in the right place.

Or you can think – at last – the boy has started to fulfil his potential and we are finally on the right track, and needn't look back.

Which one was it with Peter, back at that time when Jesus asked his disciples, never mind if some people around think that Jeremiah or Elijah or even John the Baptist has come back to life, who do you say that I am?

*Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

Who would have thought it? Peter the bumbling. Peter the fisherman. Peter the impetuous. Peter who denied Christ. Peter who never quite seemed to get it, who rather often lost the plot. Yet Peter the rock on which Jesus said he would build his church, Peter who would give stability, Peter Jesus' secret weapon against the forces of Hell.

Peter is a mass of contradictions. From a distance he looks like the schoolboy whose right answer was indeed a flash in the pan. Just three verses later we have Peter taking Jesus to one side and telling him not to go to Jerusalem where he, Jesus would suffer and die. “Never, Lord!, This shall never happen to you!” “Get thee behind me Satan!” The rock has become a stumbling block. How quickly things can change.

Thirty-nine years ago last month I was doing three things.

I was wondering whether despite spending rather too much time with my girlfriend when I should have been swotting for my finals I would still get the 2-1 degree that would stop my parents lynching me.

I was wondering whether my relationship with the said girlfriend would last through the summer holidays.

And thirdly I went on a three-week trip through Europe with an old school friend. I blistered my feet tramping through the streets of Brussels, Strasbourg, Basel, Milan, Florence, Naples, Pisa and Paris. And between Florence and Naples we went to Rome. In each place we had sought out the famous bits and variously walked through them, gazed at them or climbed up to the top of them. In Rome this meant the Vatican, and St Peter's basilica. If you have been there or even seen large papal events on the TV you will know that St Peter's is massive. And in a not awfully Christian immodest way, along the floor of the cathedral are placed markers that show how far other large churches would stretch if they were placed inside this massive building. After St Peter's, St Paul's in London comes second at 158m long.

Would St Peter the man come good? – well, the clue is in the name of this building at the heart of the Roman Catholic Church.

And in the mosaic decoration inside around the drum under the dome of St Peter's you can read the words, in capital letters two metres high: Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam. Tibi dabo claves regni caelorum. You are Peter, and on this

rock I will build my church. I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

What would Peter, or Paul for that matter, think now of these massive church buildings that bear their names? And of the Church, with a capital C, which now spans the earth and touches countries they never heard of? Would they recognise it as the descendant of the infant Church they knew in Rome and across those parts of the Roman Empire they had actually encountered? How would they reconcile our structures and our hierarchy, our organisation and our dis-organisation with the people they knew and had appointed to be pastors and preachers from Galatia to Ephesus, from Jerusalem to Corinth to Rome itself?

One thing they would recognise is the variety of people that make up the church, that are attracted to it and who take on roles within it. In your mind's eye look around you and you have to admit we are a pretty disparate bunch. And that was the case in the early Church too. If the Church had not contained men and women, slave and free, people with origins both Jewish and Greek, then Paul would not have used that list in declaring our unity in Jesus. And look at the variety of people in Jesus' entourage – his disciples obviously included both educated men and artisans. He attracted scholars like Nicodemus, poor people and rich, like Joseph of Arimathea – who could afford his own tomb.

And with variety of background, different academic and financial resources comes a variety in personal, you might say mental resources too. Which brings me to another point, and lets me bring in Moses.

...though not before we have a musical pause, in which a song reminds us of the paradoxes in the life and the nature of Jesus: *Meekness and Majesty*.

Song: *Meekness and Majesty*  
sung by Graham Kendrick  
from the album *Graham Kendrick, the Ultimate Collection*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they can be found online if you are so equipped.]

## Reflection (2)

From the paradox of Christ back to the paradox of Peter – and just as someone in the first century would have been entitled to look at Peter and say – *blimey, who would have thought he would come to be the rock on which Jesus built his Church*, so Moses could be entitled to say to himself – *who would have thought it?*

What a start in life! Singled out by fate and a resourceful family to be saved from a massacre of his generation of young Israelite boys and in fact raised in whatever passed for a palace in those days, Moses grew up with royal privileges, the adopted son of the Pharaoh's household. You'll recall how, later on, he committed murder in defence of some of his own people, and had to flee to the desert, where he encountered God in the burning bush. All of it surprising stuff. A tale with more twists to it than a Dan Brown novel, but perhaps more credible.

And if **we** are surprised by the twists in the story, Moses himself must have had his head in a spin at every turn. And he wasn't convinced it could be happening, or should. You remember his reaction to being told by God that he was chosen to be His messenger to Pharaoh and a rescuer to his own people?

"No, it can't be me. You've got it wrong. I can't speak. Exodus 3.11: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" and in chapter 4, verse 10:

“O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant – I am slow of speech and tongue”.

But life is full, and our lives are full, and our churches are full of people who have ended up doing things that they never thought they would. If we were together I might ask everyone to share something they ended up doing that they would never have believed.

As it is, within my own circle of friends and family and church connections, I could point you at someone who finished up as a Fleet Street advertising executive having started out as a Birmingham bobby on the beat. Another one-time police recruit now a professor at the University of Warwick. Someone who studied Geography who ended up an accountant, an archeologist who ended up teaching English. A microbiology graduate who has taken a lead in regulating the gambling industry, for goodness sake. In my own case for the early years of my life I might reasonably have expected to stay in Glasgow, perhaps followed my father and grandfather to the University of Glasgow and found a career north of the border, but after my own share of twists and turns I have ended up in Coventry.

It's not exactly the story of a journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. Some might say it's the other way round... but obviously not me.

And just as Moses was challenged, with a little effort I can point to something in the story of each of these people that has been God putting a challenge to each individual. And that individual taking it. To change their life. To change the lives of those they would then interact with. And so to shape God's Church, God's world.

Daring as it is for me to compare any of us to Moses or the Apostle Peter, they are not the only ones who have been taken by surprise by what they come to realize God wants them to do. And every day God calls more people to his service, the variety of people that we are.

And as God calls a variety of people to his service, so he calls us to a great variety of service. Paul refers to this in a reading set for this week that we have not heard read yet. In a variation on another text we might find more familiar he says:

[Romans 12.1-8]

<sup>1</sup> *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God— this is your spiritual act of worship.*

<sup>2</sup> *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is— his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

<sup>3</sup> *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

<sup>4</sup> *Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,*

<sup>5</sup> *so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

<sup>6</sup> *We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith.*

<sup>7</sup> *If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach;*

<sup>8</sup> *if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.*

So there we are – God still surprises us with the way he can turn what we are into what

we can be.

God doesn't ask us to do the impossible. The potential is always there, which is why Caryl Micklem wrote that verse in one of our hymns:

*Father of Jesus, your covenant mercies  
raised from death's darkness the self that was his;  
raise us with him as your people, as voices  
calling your world **to become what it is.***

Amen

### **Prayers of Intercession**

We pray

Lord God, you guide us in our worship and our prayers – hear us now as we pray again for your world in all its variety and your people with all their range, both of problems and of potential.

And hear us as we pray for the Church set to be the body of Christ, active in your creation for your sake and to show your love, your care, your power.

You called Moses, born as an alien unwelcome and under threat, unsure of any skills or talents he could use in your service. Even so, call us to communicate with your world, even where your message is unwelcome. Even where we are doubtful whether we can make a difference.

Your Son called Simon Peter the fisherman, from a lowly family and unglamorous occupation, to be the foundation of the Church we identify with. Help us to realise the value in everyone and to neither disrespect nor discount the contributions of the humble.

Responding to your call and armed and encouraged by your Spirit may we act for you and for Christ in a world staggering under the load of pandemic, conflict, injustice and want.

In our own land we have been distracted by the fall-out of disrupted education and the agony of assessments and algorithms gone wrong. May those seeking to put things right be motivated by fairness and by a concern for people over popularity or party advantage.

We wonder at public health policy changes and pray for those who are looking for answers to how best record what is past and shape what is to come in our care for all in this society.

We look outwith our own borders and feel helpless as internal conflict grows and unrest threatens safety from Belarus to Beirut. Lord, sow seeds of peace and nurture growth of just treatment for all.

And as we try to maintain the activity of our churches in support of members and friends may we also continually search for opportunities to act for those still on the margins or returning there, those who have lost much in the lockdown but who lack a voice, those who are struggling with the ab-normality of life in 2020.

We offer these prayers in the name of Jesus, who still looks for disciples and is calling us to follow him.

Amen.

