

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 6 September 2020 ('Fourteenth 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 6 September, the fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2020.

Details of music and sources are in the online transcript, and I would like to thank Erica, Jo and Wynne for their help in preparing this week's edition. Jo and Wynne also recommended our closing hymn and the closing music, respectively.

Introductory Music¹ – Fourth Movement (*Sarabande*) from Harpsichord Suite No. 4 in D Minor, by G F Handel performed by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields and Alexander Briger, from the album *Handel Sarabande*

Call to Worship: (from Psalm 119:)

Here are words from Psalm 119:

Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end. Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways. Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you. Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good. See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness give me life.

A hymn of commitment

Hymn: *Let the flame burn brighter*
written and sung by Graham Kendrick, from the album
The Very Best of Graham Kendrick: Knowing you, Jesus

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don't permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript.]

Prayers

Let us pray.

Lord God, as we gather once again in this clever but strange way to worship you, accept our praise and our thanks, our confession and our resolution.

We praise you for your care of your creation through all time. Through all the millennia since humankind first acquired the faculties to respond to you. Through all the centuries since our focus was sharpened by the gift, the life, the teaching, the death and the resurrection of your Son. We wonder at your power and your love.

We thank you for the world's resources which we pray for grace to share fairly. We thank you for families and friends and ways of keeping in touch, even in a

time when contact is restricted and habitual touch is forbidden. We thank you for our churches and the will they have to maintain activity and a worship life. May we find ever more satisfying and worthwhile ways to come together and work together even while the world endures the limitations of lockdown.

We ask forgiveness where we have taken the foot off the gas, stepped back thinking there was nothing to be done, looked after ourselves when our neighbour is in want.

As we read, as we record, as we listen to another podcast act of worship, may we learn once again from your Word in scripture, through the example of Christ and the words that the prophets brought to your people long ago.

In the name of Jesus we ask these and all our prayers, and now pray together 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.

Scriptureⁱⁱ: Ezekiel 33:7-11

⁷ 'Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me.

⁸ When I say to the wicked, "You wicked person, you will surely die," and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

¹⁰ 'Son of man, say to the Israelites, "This is what you are saying: 'Our offences and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?'" ¹¹ Say to them, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?"

Reflection (1)

All over the news as I write is talk of the return to school in England, and although much of the discussion is focused on the difficulties and challenges of the pandemic, any start of a new school year brings a certain excitement with it, with its fresh start, making a new beginning, with new text books and teachers, with a new opportunity to shine.

This opportunity is not restricted to schoolchildren.

God offers a fresh start when he says to Ezekiel,

"If you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life..."

Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?"

What had gone wrong with the Jewish nation, at the time of Ezekiel?

Time is too short to go into all the details, but Ezekiel was fulfilling his prophetic call at the time when the people of Judah were subject to conquest and exile at the hands of Babylon. Writers generally assume that Ezekiel himself went to Babylon with the first wave of exiles in about 597BC.

You might think that under those circumstances things couldn't actually get much worse, so why should God send a prophet to warn or guide the people? Well, actually things did get worse! The first years of the ministry of Ezekiel were marked by warnings and threats that the punishment of the people was not complete. In 587BC the city of Jerusalem was captured again when this time the walls and the Temple were destroyed. More of the people were exiled.

What had gone wrong for the Jews? We get the impression from our reading that they could be described as "wicked" and "sinful". In what way?

A lot of it is down to abandoning appropriate ways of worship. There had been for a few generations a kind of swaying back and forth amongst the rulers of Judah – swaying back and forth between on the one hand trying to pursue the Law of God and on the other hand simply following whichever religious practices seemed to appeal.

Read all about it in 2 Kings

For example in chapter 21: Manasseh (son of Hezekiah) was twelve years old when he became king,

...and he reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-five years. His mother's name was Hephzibah. 2 He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. 3 He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal and made an Asherah pole, as Ahab king of Israel had done. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them. 4 He built altars in the temple of the Lord... In both courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. 6 He sacrificed his own son in the fire, practised sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums... He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord.

No kidding!

You see how the pendulum seems to swing between those who follow God's way – David, Solomon, Hezekiah, and those who go in quite the other direction – Manasseh was one backslider. Amon, his son, was another. Then Josiah, **his** son was another **virtuous** man. It was a cyclic thing. And God punished the wrong-doers, seems occasionally to have given respite to the good men. But the Babylonians were coming, whoever was on the throne.

This business of taking on aspects of other religious practices - it is as if one of our church members were to come back from a holiday in the far east and suggest that we ought to have a statue of Buddha in the middle of the sanctuary, or from India and suggest we adopt all of the Hindu deities and have **their** statues around the place.

Some might say this was people hedging their bets – making sure that who ever was right, you had a toe-hold in that particular arm of religious practice. But it would be diluting the faith – compromising the principles – I think it's been a bad idea through all time. It was certainly a bad idea for the Jews. Were they victims of their own backsliding, or were they doomed to become the regional underdogs anyway? The Bible certainly makes the link between their faith and their fate.

You might say, if the fate of the UK right now depended on its faithfulness to a set of values, we are on rather shaky ground. Successive administrations, particularly in recent years, have tried to identify a uniquely British set of standards. We no longer live in an era when we can claim a uniquely **Christian** set of standards.

Politicians identify, through looking back at statistics, a drift away from old ways. And in a sense they get a bit prophetic with us, sometimes threatening dire consequences if we don't try to get "back to basics". In that example, the improvements in our national way of life that are proposed of course depend on which party the politicians belong to. But at least the pendulum swing of party policies reminds us that we too live in an age where the national attitude changes over time, and sometimes we seem to lose our way.

We'll hear our New Testament reading after another hymn. Seeking forgiveness is part of our theme. This hymn confirms God offers it. *Great is thy faithfulness*

Song/Music: *Great is thy faithfulness* by T O Chisholm
sung by the Celebration Choir with the
Sheffield Salvation Army Citadel Band, from the album
The Best Hymns Album In the World... Ever!

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;
there is no shadow of turning with thee,
thou changest not, thy compassions they fail not,
as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
great is thy faithfulness, Lord unto me!

Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above;
join with all nature in manifold witness,
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
strength for today, and bright hope for tomorrow
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside.

Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20

¹⁵ 'If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over.

¹⁶ But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." ¹⁷ If they still refuse to listen, tell it

to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

¹⁸ 'Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

¹⁹ 'Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.'

Reflection (2)

The concluding verse of our New Testament reading will have sounded quite familiar.

"For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

It's a text I think we sometimes bring into use when we are running short of numbers for a church function, or an Elders' meeting or an evening service or whatever. "Where two or three are gathered together", we say, and smile and reassure ourselves that this small gathering is still worthwhile.

And we are right, of course.

But this reading put it into its original context. This is actually Jesus confirming, after outlining a procedure for dealing with disagreements and disputes, that he will be present in the final decision-making. Which is reassuring.

The context is wider than that, however – because this instruction and reassurance are found in the midst of a series of passages about forgiveness and redemption. Just before our reading, the parable of the lost sheep.

If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

Just **after** our reading, the parable of the unforgiving servant and the latest of Peter's blundering contributions to the Gospel story – how often should we forgive each other? – as often as seven times? Jesu's reply means either "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven". In either case he is laying down any idea of keeping a count and asking us to simply get used to forgiving each other.

Which brings me to the point - for today's purposes I just want to note the parallel between this series of comments and the Old Testament situation we talked about a few minutes ago.

For the Old Testament story doesn't come to an end with the collapse of the state of Judah and exile to Babylon. There was to be redemption. There was ultimately to be a return from exile. God continued caring. Ezekiel's prophecies change from words of warning to words of hope. God never drew a line under the whole sorry lot and said "good riddance".

He cared about each and every king, each and every member of the community. Cared enough to seek out the lost sheep. Cared enough to give another opportunity. There seems always to have been one more chance. And it was never the **last** chance.

This was the framework within which Jesus wanted his church to work – in fact the framework within which he wanted people everywhere to work. Deadlines and ultimatums are not particularly Christian things.

I come back to the idea of a new term beginning. Maybe like me you always get this sort of feeling when September comes round. In an ordinary year, suddenly after the summer holidays and the August Bank Holiday the church-related meetings would leap into the diary. We have been used to resuming activities.

But there is a sense of not just starting again but starting afresh. A chance to do things a new way. Another chance.

God gives us another chance. Time after time after time. We should be the same with others. As many as seven times? Actually rather more than that. But there is always one more chance with God. We just have to be prepared to take it.

Prayers of Intercession

[Our prayers are punctuated by *O Lord, hear my prayer*, a short song from the Taizé Community and taken from their album *Simply Taizé*]

O Lord, hear my prayer

Lord, hear our prayers for the Church and for the world, for your people listening now to these words and for your people who are listening out for your call and your guidance. For your people who are straining to hear your words over the tumult of the world's busy-ness and conflict. For those among your people who have never heard your Word and yet yearn for purpose in their lives and relief from suffering.

O Lord, hear my prayer

Lord, hear our prayers for those who are waiting to return to church buildings, to return to familiar ways of worship and the sights and sounds of their home fellowship. Help us, help them to deal with frustrations and impatience and even disappointment at the restrictions and limitations involved. In the heart of our faith help us to find and to implement the key characteristics of a life lived for Christ.

Hear our prayers for the world in which we would have been more active, if not for the pandemic. For those who have missed the community outreach that has not been at the same level. For those who have fallen through gaps the church might have filled.

O Lord, hear my prayer

Hear our prayers for those who have returned to work or to school in this early part of September. For those whose calling is to provide for the education of our nation's children, that they may keep them and themselves safe as they follow that calling. For those given the privilege and responsibility of governing, that they may be blessed with clarity of thought and a vision of what is good for all the human family.

Across the globe women and men old and young are suffering because of disasters natural and man-made, conflicts at every level from domestic abuse to war, droughts and floods, homelessness and poverty. May we never be daunted by the scale of need. May those who channel hope as well as aid, who seek for peace, be strengthened by your Spirit but supported by our own actions and words.

And may we ever distinguish between what we want and what we need, seeking to share the earth's resources as well as your love.

O Lord, hear my prayer

In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen

A hymn of dedication by Charles Wesley...

Hymn: *O thou who camest from above*
 sung by the Choir of St John's College, Cambridge
 with John Challenger and Andrew Nethsingha
 from the album *Wesley: Ascribe unto the Lord - Sacred Choral Works*

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up the gift in me.

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat;
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make my sacrifice complete.

Blessing

As we turn back to the needs and demands of the world may we ever retain a sense of what God is calling us to do and gratitude for his gift of an ever fresh start.

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: *The John Dunbar Theme*, by John Barry
 from the film soundtrack album *Dances with Wolves*

Thank you for listening to our podcast. If you would like to read for us please get in touch, and do let us have any comments and suggestions. A full archive of all of our podcasts is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

Credits

The fourth movement (*Sarabande*) from an arrangement of the Harpsichord Suite No. 4 in D Minor, by G F Handel was performed by the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields and Alexander Briger, from the album *Handel Sarabande*

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and *The John Dunbar Theme*, by John Barry, was taken from the film soundtrack album *Dances with Wolves*

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