

A Podcast for North Coventry Group – 11 October 2020 - ‘Nineteenth Sunday 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 11 October, the nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2020.

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

A significant part of this podcast material is also being used this weekend in worship at Holyhead Road URC, Coventry.

Introductory Musicⁱ – Choral Prelude 2, Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645
by J S Bach
played by Igor Levit, from the album *Encounter*

Call to Worship: Words from Psalm 106

Praise the Lord. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures for ever. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord or fully declare his praise?

We hear words of praise and an invitation to worship in our hymn, *All are welcome...*

Hymn: *All are welcome (Let us build a house)*
sung by The Chapel of St. Ignatius Choir
from their album *Light & Shadow*

[Unfortunately our licensing arrangements don’t permit the reproduction of the words of this song in this transcript, although they may be found online if you are so equipped, and are certainly in a number of current hymnbooks.]

Prayers

We offer God our worship and respond to his goodness in our prayers: let us pray

Lord God, we are grateful to you for so many things it is difficult and even impossible to list them. But we sum up the gifts you have given, and we say *thank you*.

The words in an old prayer thank you for our ‘creation and preservation’. And we too want to thank you both that we are here and that we are *still* here. We explore through science the beginnings of all things and find facts to support our speculation. But whatever we find there will always be the question, *yes – but what came before?* And our answer must be you, our God.

We explore through study of History the building blocks of what we like to call our civilisation, and rejoice that along the way so many of the leaders of nations have been motivated to seek the good of people and improvements in their rights and living conditions. Where they do, we see your hand at work.

And we thank you for the *creation and preservation* of the Church, the Body of Christ, which has taken forward through the centuries the work and purposes of your Son, who was the greatest of all your gifts. Despite all that went before, you sent and sacrificed him to give us in his dying and resurrection an ever-living example.

Where the Church has failed you as an institution and where we and our fellow members of the human family identifying with Christ have failed you as individuals, Lord forgive us.

And we pray that once again we may be truly thankful for the gift that you keep on giving – a chance to try again and to try harder.

In these difficult times and as we worship apart and together under strange constraints show us how to act for you, how to imitate Christ and, following his example, how to show our care and your love to the world.

We gather together and make complete our offering of prayer to you, God, in the words that Jesus 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: Exodus 32.1-14

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered round Aaron and said, 'Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him.'

² Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.' ³ So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, 'These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.'

⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.' ⁶ So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterwards they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.

⁷ Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. ⁸ They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt."

⁹ 'I have seen these people,' the Lord said to Moses, 'and they are a stiff-necked people. ¹⁰ Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.'

¹¹ But Moses sought the favour of the Lord his God. 'Lord,' he said, 'why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty

hand? ¹²Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth”? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. ¹³Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever.”

¹⁴Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

Reflection (1)

God’s relationship with Israel after the departure from Egypt didn’t get off on the right foot.

This relationship, and life in general for the Children of Israel wandering in the desert, was not easy. To begin with, they had the on-off, stop go experience of preparing to leave and then actually leaving Egypt.

Before they had gone far, they were pursued by Pharaoh and his army, and were facing a return to Egypt when Moses miraculously found them a way across the Red Sea.

Then they came to an oasis that had undrinkable water. Moses turned the water sweet.

Then they thought they were going to starve, but God gave them quail and manna to eat.

They thought they didn’t have **enough** water, but Moses was able to make water spring from a rock.

And then there was a lengthy period, in which Moses was away up Mount Sinai receiving the Law from God, being given the tablets of stone. He was away so long that the people began to fear that this was another low point in their history that **this** time was not going to get any better.

And I’m reminded of those times I recall from primary school when the teacher got up and left the classroom for a while, telling us to be good while she was gone. We were, for a while. Then the longer the absence went on, the longer we felt the absence might go on, and the noisier we felt able to become. There are few silences quite as complete as the one that falls just after the teacher finally comes back.

So while the cat was away, the mouse that was Israel felt able to play. And they donated their jewellery – the valuables they had brought from Egypt. And Aaron made them into a golden calf. A calf which they worshipped as their God.

God, the one God, the one Moses was talking to, was understandably rather cheesed off about this. After all, he had looked after them and was in the process of putting them on the straight and narrow. So, we hear, he decided to wash his hands of them – they were too stubborn to be brought round. They were what older translations of the Bible call “a stiff-necked people” – unbending, going their own way.

“Don’t try to stop me”, says God to Moses – I’m going to do away with them and then you can get on and father the beginnings of my holy people. It was as if God had decided to forget about everything that had happened since he had first made his covenant with Abraham, and had decided instead to begin again, with Moses.

But of course Moses **does** try to stop him – he appeals to God’s common sense and almost to his vanity – what would be the good of bringing the people out of Egypt, just to kill

them all here? How would it be for God's *public image* if the Egyptians were able to say, scornfully, that the God of the Israelites had liberated them just to kill them all later?

So, our reading concluded, the Lord changed his mind and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

It's a nice, cosy finish to our reading – but [with probably no children around] we can reveal what is better off kept till after the adult viewing watershed. Moses goes down the mountain and gives the Children of Israel an earful. He crumbles up the golden calf idol and makes the Children of Israel drink it, mixed in water! He then collects together a band of faithful Levites and gets them to kill around 3000 of the people in a rampage through the camp. And then God sends a plague on the camp, and the implication is that this mops up the remnant of the guilty.

Like I said, life, for the Children of Israel, was not easy. Though time and again we can see in their recorded actions and attitudes an echo of our own, or of those of the world we live in. This passage might make us reflect on our own impatience, our own lack of application – stickability.

But taken as a whole, and looking from the perspective of the developing Jewish nation, the story is a severe warning, and perhaps a foreshadowing of how things were to be later in the life of the Jews.

There's another warning in our New Testament scripture in a couple of minutes. But first we'll hear a setting of a psalm. A version of Psalm 34 you will probably recognise: *Through all the changing scenes of life*.

Song/Music: *Through all the changing scenes of life* (original words by N Tate sung by the choir of Llandaff Cathedral from the album *The Complete New English Hymnal, Volume 19*)

Through all the changing scenes of life,
in trouble and in joy,
the praises of my God shall still
my heart and tongue employ.

Oh, make but trial of his love;
experience will decide
how blest they are, and only they,
who in his truth confide.

Oh, magnify the Lord with me,
with me exalt his name;
when in distress to him I called,
he to my rescue came.

Fear him, ye saints, and you will then
have nothing else to fear;
make you his service your delight;
your wants shall be his care.

The hosts of God encamp around
the dwellings of the just;
deliverance he affords to all
who on his succor trust.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
the God whom we adore,
be glory, as it was, is now
and shall be evermore!

Scripture: Matthew 22.1-14

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: ²The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come.

⁴ ‘Then he sent some more servants and said, “Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.”

⁵ ‘But they paid no attention and went off – one to his field, another to his business. ⁶ The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them. ⁷ The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

⁸ ‘Then he said to his servants, “The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. ⁹ So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.” ¹⁰ So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹ ‘But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ¹² He asked, “How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?” The man was speechless.

¹³ ‘Then the king told the attendants, “Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

¹⁴ ‘For many are invited, but few are chosen.’

Reflection (2)

Our New Testament passage is also a warning.

We have read from Matthew but you may be aware there is another version of this story in Luke’s Gospel. In Luke the story is simply about the man whose guests refuse to come and eat with him, so he goes and calls in others from the highways and byways to fill the gaps, swearing that none of the ungrateful ones he first invited is going to get a look in.

In Matthew it’s all transformed into quite a different story. This time it’s a king who is giving the banquet, and some of those he asks to come and share in it go so far as to kill his messengers. And then, most strangely of all, once he has had his wish and the empty places have been filled by whatever people his servants could find on the streets, he punishes one of them for not wearing wedding clothes. Seems strange... seems unreasonable.

Certainly this passage like our Exodus reading is another severe warning. But not a warning for the ancient Jews this time. Not a warning for those who were still formulating their relationship with the God who had brought them out of Egypt.

This time it’s a warning for two groups of people. One is the group of the priests, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who at this point in Matthew’s Gospel are plotting to have Jesus done away with. They are warned to take heed of the invitation that God gives. When Matthew’s Gospel was being written, or the version of it that comes down to us, Jews were persecuting Christians – this may be the idea behind the way some of the messengers in the story were being taken and killed. This story warns the Jews to be ready, to receive the invitation and to accept it!

And it’s a warning to the community of Christians which was growing in the first century. They, if you like, were the guests who made it to the banquet. Some responding properly to the original invitations, some of them like the latecomers called in from the streets. Their warning is the warning of the fate of the man who was not wearing wedding clothes. Here was someone given an opportunity, who had not properly seized it, if you like had not taken it seriously.

And here also, *at last*, is part of the story and part of the message that we can take for ourselves. For wherever we are on our own journeys of faith, we are not like the Children of Israel, lost and thinking themselves abandoned by God just because their leaders went away for a while. And the fact that we want to gather inside a church building surely means we have responded to God's invitation to come together, as it were at a wedding feast. We are no longer staying far off, finding excuses not to come, or even slaying the messengers.

But are we wearing our wedding clothes? You'll all have your own idea of what it is appropriate to wear at a wedding. Up to the age of ten or so, any wedding I attended I was made to wear a kilt, that thankfully in time became too small for me. I've conducted over 60 weddings through the years, mainly at Holyhead Road church, and I think I've seen everything. Brides and grooms remain fairly traditional in their choice of clothes, but as far as the guests are concerned it seems that anything goes at a wedding - you wear what you want, but the point is the *metaphorical* wedding clothing – the way you come prepared to take a proper part in what is going on.

It may have seemed unfair in our Gospel story to sling the unprepared wedding guest out into the dark, but the point of the story may be the quality of our response to the unexpected and even undeserved invitation that God gives us to share in the great things he offers.

If the opportunities of Christian life mirrored in the story of the wedding feast are about giving and taking, then you might say that the man without the wedding clothes is someone who was willing to take without giving anything. The least you could do, given a free slap-up meal, is to dress up for the occasion.

Don't confuse this Gospel story with an instruction to feed the poor, to be charitable to those less well-off than ourselves.

Like the story in the Old Testament (the whole story of the rescued Jewish nation) it is a story of the opportunity, freely given by God, that it is then up to us to grasp, to seize, then to follow up by taking on board all its responsibilities and obligations, as well as all the privileges.

Prayers of Intercession

Conscious of our need to align our ambitions and our activities with God's purposes, let us pray.

Lord, we bring you prayers for the Church and for the world, for all your creation and all the members of the human family. Only you know the full geography of the world you have made. Only you can put names to all of your people.

Yet we want to care for those facets of the world that we *can* see, so many of which by our neglect we have harmed. We want to put ourselves and our resources at your disposal, to become part of your armoury in the war against waste and abuse. Whatever the mistakes of the past, may we atone for them by our future care of this planet, the countryside around us, the interlinked and mutually dependent ecosystems we are still striving to understand.

We have heard scripture remind us of rights and responsibilities. As we enjoy the freedom you offer to those who follow Christ, may we also hear when you call us to a particular work for you. May we understand how we can serve each other. And may we never relax into an

easy assumption that we always know what is best but keep listening for a fresh call and be prepared to follow you in a new direction.

We thank you for all those who have heard your call to serve the community as key workers, especially in our health service. As numbers of cases of Covid-19 grow be with all who are affected, as patients, relatives and other connections, and as carers and testers, hospital workers and support staff, chaplains, doctors and nurses.

We pray for those who are in hospital or under treatment for other reasons. [Of the fellowship at Holyhead Road we remember especially Pat Elliman and pray for her, for Mal, their family and their friends.]

Lord, all round the world there is suffering, whose causes and effects are not easy to address, cure or relieve. Be with us all as we look for a role in which we are truly sharing your love and bringing your healing.

Be with us and our own families, those with whom we share a bubble and those we are barred from coming close to. In you all are held in one embrace, and to you we commend all of our lives, for ever.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

A hymn of assurance that whatever we do, whatever our situation, however far from God we stray, God has us in his care. Welsh voices singing the tune Aberystwyth and the words, *Jesu lover of my soul*.

Hymn: *Aberystwyth, Jesu, lover of my soul* (words by Charles Wesley 1707-1788)
sung by the Treorchy Male Choir
from the album *Land of Song - Welsh Choral Classics*

Jesu, lover of my soul,
let me to thy bosom fly,
while the nearer waters roll,
while the tempest still is high:
hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
'til the storm of life is past;
safe into the haven guide;
O receive my soul at last.

Other refuge have I none;
hangs my helpless soul on thee;
leave, oh, leave me not alone,
still support and comfort me.
All my trust on thee is stayed;
all my help from thee I bring;
cover my defenceless head
with the shadow of Thy wing.

Plenteous grace with thee is found;
grace to cover all my sin;
let the healing streams abound;
make and keep me pure within.
Thou of life the fountain art;
freely let me take of thee;
spring thou up within my heart;
rise to all eternity. Amen

Blessing

May God who gives us so much guide us in our response. May we choose the right way to accept the privilege of being his people while acknowledging the responsibility of being his workers in his world.

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: *Allegretto*, the first movement of *Palladio* by Karl Jenkins performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer and taken from the album *The Very Best of Karl Jenkins*

Thank you for listening to our podcast. Although some of our churches are resuming worship in the church buildings, at present it is our hope to continue podcast production until my retirement from the pastoral ministry at the end of 2020, so long as there is a demand. We always welcome feedback, suggestions, and volunteers to read. A full archive of all of our podcasts is on our website [<https://revdbill.uk>].

Credits

The *Choral Prelude number 2, Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 645* by J S Bach was played by Igor Levit, from the album *Encounter*. This album has just won the *Gramophone Album of the Year* award.

All are welcome (Let us build a house) was sung by The Chapel of St. Ignatius Choir and is on their album *Light & Shadow*

Through all the changing scenes of life was sung by the choir of Llandaff Cathedral and is from the album *The Complete New English Hymnal, Volume 19*

Aberystwyth, Jesu, lover of my soul was sung by the Treorchy Male Choir from the album *Land of Song - Welsh Choral Classics*

Allegretto, the first movement of *Palladio* by Karl Jenkins was performed by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the composer and taken from the album *The Very Best of Karl Jenkins*

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