

Sunday 25th October 2020

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CALL TO WORSHIP

Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout
all generations.

In you, we come home—

to rest, to wrestle, to love, to be loved.

We dwell in you.

Before the mountains were born, before you delivered
the whole world,

from everlasting past to everlasting future, you are God.

In you, we are home—

we dream, we flourish, we fade, we rejoice.

We dwell in you.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Loving God,

you not only welcome us, you receive us into yourself.

Give us courage to be so open to others,

to let them become so dear to us,

that we might share not only your gospel

but also our lives,

through Christ,

who makes room for us all. **Amen.**

HYMN Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven

PSALM 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

but their delight is in the law of the LORD,

and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees planted by streams of water,

which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,

nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Our spirits are like new grass:
at the dawn they spring up fresh,
but by sunset they dry up and wither,
blown away in spiritual death.
Let us confess our frailty before our merciful God.

**Lord, we confess:
we do not live as those worthy
to be entrusted with the good news of your grace;
we relate to others callously
as though we do not trust that gospel ourselves;
we seek to please and manipulate,
using flattery to gain praise and distinction;
we use condescension as a mask
to cover insecurity or a need for power.
Our motives are mixed, impure.
Lord, reassure and cleanse us,
in Jesus' name. Amen.**

Beloved ones,
believe again the gospel,
that in Christ we are accepted as we are.
Believe that we are forgiven, loved with the delight
of a nursing mother cherishing her child.
Believe that we are the church, the body of Christ,
called to love one another as gentle children of God.

MATTHEW 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

REFLECTION

Lord Jesus, your understanding of Scripture astonished and humbled all around you. Send your Spirit to illumine this Word that our understanding and wisdom may be increased. **Amen.**

Jesus, because of the things he said and did, made many enemies among the establishment of his own society, both Jewish and Roman, religious and secular. The proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God was heard by many in positions of authority as a direct challenge to their status and their power. And in many ways, that is exactly what it was – when God's ways and the ways of the world collide, or come into conflict, people have to make a choice. Complacency and apathy may have been the order of the day for many, and many were comfortable with things just the way they were. Jesus called them to a new commitment to a changed society and a changed world, that began with changing individual lives, and for most people, accepting the need to change can be very discomfiting.

In Jerusalem Jesus has cleansed the Temple, and thrown the money changers out. In the eyes of those with a vested interest in profiting from the pilgrims and worshippers in the Temple, he appears a dangerous radical intent on overthrowing everything they hold dear. Yet if only they knew it, the power of his message is not contained in violent and angry action, but in the preaching and practice of a power far greater, and capable of bringing about far-reaching change – the power of God's love encountered in the lives of ordinary people.

As has happened before, some try to entrap Jesus – here, a lawyer asks him which of the commandments in the law is the greatest. It is a trick question: all the laws are to be observed equally, as God-given commandments. If Jesus suggests that any one law is more important, he will in effect be undermining these commandments, a form of heresy or even blasphemy for which Jesus could be tried and put to death.

Again, Jesus is wiser than his opponents: he doesn't give the straight answer they're looking for, but instead takes two commandments from the law – one from Deuteronomy, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and one from Leviticus, the injunction to love your neighbour as yourself, and places them side by side to form a new commandment. He wasn't the first to do so, but here again he declares the fundamental principles on which all God's laws are established, and from which they follow: as he says 'on these hang all the law and the prophets.'

The point is, that Jesus understands these laws in a different way from people with a legalistic attitude – like the lawyer who asks the question. By his answer he demonstrates that the law cannot be understood simply as a set of rules and regulations. At the beginning of his public ministry Jesus said 'Do not consider that I have come to destroy the law and the prophets: I have come not to destroy them, but to fulfil them'. By asserting that the whole law results from the intention of God's love, and is grounded in a God who is love, Jesus returns to first principles, to the reasons why God gave the commandments and the law in the first place.

And that is, they were given so that Israel might be a light to the gentiles, an example to all the other nations, in living lives of love for others as God commands.

Since the very beginning of the Christian church these two commandments have been central to our self-understanding as the people of God living in a new relationship with God in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

The love of God which Jesus embodies, is like the love of God, that is deep, powerful, enduring and steadfast, the power to give life and to overcome the power of death. It is the perfect love that drives out fear, for it is all-consuming and all-embracing; a love that has no limit and no end, for the world, and all its people. It is the love we see in Jesus, who lays down his life for his friends, and who is moved by love to heal all who suffer in body, mind or spirit, restoring them to the completeness of life that God desires for us all.

Our response to the experience of God's love must be one of heartfelt thanksgiving, and the desire to share what we have received with others around us: to demonstrate the power of God's love to transform human lives and communities, its power to change the world when it changes people. It is a daunting challenge; how can we love God, as God loves us? How can we love our neighbour, when our neighbours so often refuse to love us in return? The sacrificial nature of the love of God is that it is given freely, even if there is no hope of return.

God requires of us that we have a love for others that is not passive, but is intentional, an act of the heart's will, a giving of ourselves, as God has given to us. Loving others even when we find them difficult to cope with is a hard ask, but essential for those who would have the same heart and mind and attitude that is clearly seen in Jesus.

Jesus loved even those who hated him and persecuted him, he loved the thief who died beside him, and I have no doubt he loved the chief priests, the saducees and pharisees who were his enemies and who brought about his death, and that he loved the Romans who condemned him and crucified him.

Jesus also challenged his followers to see him in the people we encounter in our daily living – that is, to see something of the image of God; to love them as we have been loved by him, and as he has been loved by God. The great commandment is not grounded in simply human emotion, but in the limitless love of God for creation.

The Catholic monk and writer Thomas Merton describes this love in terms of the mystery and hiddenness of God: he said that "To say that I am made in the image of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name. If, therefore, I do anything or think anything or say anything or know anything that is not purely for the love of God, it cannot give me peace, or rest, or fulfillment, or joy. To find love I must enter into the sanctuary where it is hidden, which is the mystery of God"

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Holy God, you have provided all we have needed.
You have walked alongside us
as we have journeyed through wilderness and valley
and climbed to the heights of the mountain.
We have glimpsed the promised land,
here, but not yet.

We lift up those who live in the shadow of disappointment,
having seen the promise but not the realization.

We lift up those who live in the no-longer-but-not-yet,
having left an arduous past for a future yet unknown.

We lift up those who live with the weight of responsibility,
having carried the burden of another person's pain.

We lift up those who live in the obscurity of loneliness,
having survived a torment that cannot be explained.
Lay your holy hands upon us, empowering God,
that we may be the church for them,
through Christ who sustains us. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn We sing a love, that sets all people free

BLESSING

May the Lord bless you
and lay loving hands upon you,
that you may be strengthened
to continue to walk in the faith
that others have passed on to you,
to move ahead into the promised land.