

Home Worship for Sunday 16th August from St. John's

Our worship today looks at two passages from the Bible that challenge our attitudes to what is truly Holy and righteous and to who is included in God's kingdom. I have no means of producing music and so I have chosen 'songs' that I intend to be read even on the video version and so I have not included any links here to video or audio. Indeed the first is a Psalm. Please feel free to read silently or out loud. In the case of the Psalm the word 'Selah' (a term of uncertain meaning, perhaps relating to music) is usually not said when reading aloud.

I have however, included a link to a video. In our Gospel reading the Pharisees are so shocked by Jesus's words (literally finding them a stumbling block) they cannot listen. The artist Stormzy has many songs which have a religious message but some will find it difficult to hear. Perhaps Stormzy is already high on your play list, in which case enjoy. If he is not you may find it a challenge to listen to his track 'Blinded by your grace'; but I hope it is worth the challenge. <https://youtu.be/HPuj6UISMhs>

Call to Worship

You may not have moved in place, but come now in Spirit:
Come, with purpose,
know you are in the presence of the living God.
Come to worship, and to be amazed,
to discover and learn new things.
Come, knowing that God welcomes us all with open arms.
Amen.

The first of our 'songs' this morning is the Psalm set for today, Psalm 67, a song of praise. It is part of our prayers, which continue straight after it. The prayer of confession is written with a response; you of course may read it as you wish but one way to do it if you are on your own is to read the light text silently and say the words in bold out loud.

Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm. A Song.

¹ May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
Selah

² that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.

³ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

⁴ Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for you judge the peoples with equity
and guide the nations upon earth.

Selah

⁵ Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

⁶ The earth has yielded its increase;
God, our God, has blessed us.

⁷ May God continue to bless us;
let all the ends of the earth revere him.

Lord God, as we sit before you now,
we open our hearts to you.
Help us to see that we can learn so much from others,
even from those with whom we think
we may not share much in common.
Make us willing to stand out from the crowd,
to hear your voice, and act upon it. **Amen.**

Confession

Lord, sometimes we look as though we are listening to others.

We may even make all the right noises!

But we confess that our attention is often anywhere but where it is supposed to be.

Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we are too distracted by our own concerns.

We care only for ourselves,

and listen only to those who say what we want to hear.

Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we don't listen to people

because we don't like them,

or because they are different from us.

Sometimes we have bad or unhelpful thoughts.

Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities.

Sometimes we don't listen to *you*, Lord,

because we are too busy,

or a bit frightened about what you might say to us.

Forgive us, Lord, for missed opportunities. Amen.

If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins you are faithful and just and you forgive us. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Old Testament Reading

Our Old Testament Reading is from the book of the Prophet Isaiah. It is from the opening section of the third part of the book that many scholars think comes from the time when some of the people have just returned from exile in Babylon. Not everything is as wonderful as many had expected. It is therefore perhaps a part of the book that may speak to us as we slowly emerge from lockdown. In today's passage we here of God's love and justice for **all** people, who turn to God, not just Israelites.

It is Isaiah 56 vs 1 and verses 6 to 8 (it is read by Pauline Newman on the video version, and she is reading the New International Version; the version here is the New Revised Standard Version).

¹Thus says the LORD:

Maintain justice, and do what is right,
for soon my salvation will come,
and my deliverance be revealed.

⁶And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,

all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant—

⁷these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;

for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸Thus says the Lord GOD,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

Unfortunately the song I had intended to include at this point required copyright permission which at time of 'going to print' had not been received and so I have removed it. The replacement is actually a song for Holy Communion, but the message is still relevant as we consider our communion with God and one another in other ways at the moment.

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| <p>1 As we gather, Father, seal us
in the love that knows no fear.
Draw us, heal us, reconcile us,
may there be a place of refuge here.
<i>Who share one living bread,
one Father's love,
one Saviour's grace,
one Spirit's breath ;
one holy communion.</i></p> | <p>2 No more outcasts, no more strangers,
all dividing walls are down.
Here is love that redefines us,
dignifies the least and lowest one.</p> <p>3 Source of joy, belonging, friendship,
form your family likeness here.
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
that the world may know our God is near.</p> |
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Graham Kendrick (b.1950)

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Gospel Reading

The Gospel Reading is from Matthew chapter 15, which contains teaching about inclusion in the kingdom of God. Just before the start of our reading Jesus has been challenged by the Pharisees about handwashing (the ritualistic approach rather than COVID precautions!) and he has replied harshly. The first part of our reading continues this and then the second part gives a contrast to the Pharisees' attitude of exclusive practice with the demanded inclusion of a Canaanite woman, whom it would have been assumed was excluded. It is Matthew 15.10-28 and again is read on the video version by Pauline Newman (NIV) and the text here is NRSV.

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." ¹⁵ But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." ¹⁶ Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Let us pray,

Loving God we thank you for the words we have read this morning and ask the help of your Spirit in our understanding and applying them to our lives. And now may the words written here and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. **Amen.**

Sermon

As I write A level and BTEC etc. students in Northern Ireland, Wales and England have been receiving their grades. Often this determines whether they can get in to the places they want to be. This year there have been no exams and so the grades have come from a process involving teacher assessment and moderation, which includes elements of their school/college's previous performance (not the individuals). The fallout from this is still very unclear. Is it fair; have an individual's life chances been determined by the community they come from? Who gets in?

Our readings this morning address the question of who is 'in' in God's kingdom.

The first part of the book of Isaiah speaks of the failure of the people of God (and their leaders) to live in accordance with God's righteousness (tsedeqa in Hebrew) and so they will be taken in to exile. The second part speaks of God's

righteousness and how they (the people) will return. The third part from which our reading comes now speaks of how the people (any and all people) who accept God's righteousness are being delivered: "Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed." Isa 56.v1 (the same word *tsedeqa* is translated 'doing right' and 'deliverance').

Our passage (and the verses omitted in our reading) goes on to explain how this doing right is not about a ritualistic following of regulations or about what sort of person (a true clean Israelite or not) you are. The ritualistically unclean eunuchs (Deut.23.1) are to be admitted verses 3b to 5 and our passage tells how the foreigner (see for example Exodus 12.48-49 for how foreigners are to some extent included and to some extent excluded) is to be admitted. Verse 5 is particularly worthy of note (concerning eunuchs): " I will give, in my house and within my walls, *a monument and a name* better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off." The part I have put in italics is *yad vashem* in Hebrew, and this is the name given to the holocaust memorial. One's descendants were considered to be the way to be remembered and show that God cared for you, but here even better is promised to those who cannot have children, provided they keep the Sabbath.

In the verses we did read we see this applied too to the foreigners who in the words of verse 6 'join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—'. This is open inclusion but not unconditional. The conditions are not being born into the 'right' nation or conforming to the 'right' rituals but actually love of the Lord and keeping the Sabbath. The idea of keeping the Sabbath can be seen as a restrictive conforming to tradition sort of thing (as we see with the controversies in Jesus's ministry) but at its essence it is not a restriction but a release, a rest to allow dwelling in God. The result of this is that they serve the Lord (including in the temple it seems, something not previously permitted). This service takes place in a 'house of prayer for all people'.

In the first part of the Gospel reading we pick up the story after Jesus has spoken incredibly harshly to the Pharisees. We are used to the idea that they are often on the wrong side of disputes with Jesus and so we may miss just how harsh this is (and actually also fail to note that the Pharisees had a role commended by Jesus in other places). What is it that they have got so wrong? They have pulled up Jesus's disciples (interestingly not Jesus himself; were they frightened of criticising him?) for not ritually washing their hands. (As I noted in the introduction, this is not the same as hygiene requirements so important now.) Jesus's response is that they use tradition (extra observance beyond the law) to avoid actually meeting the spirit of the law.

As our reading starts he takes up their mentioning of hand washing to illustrate that it is attitude (what is in the heart and what comes out of the mouth) rather than ritual conformity (what goes into the mouth) that indicates true adherence to the love of God. The Pharisees who ought to be right at the centre of a life following the way of God have actually not only put themselves outside the way of God but are leading others astray too. This is why the language of Jesus is so strong. In this context then the second part of the reading becomes clearer. The Canaanite women, not just a foreigner but a traditional enemy of the Jews and a woman, an outcast to Jewish eyes, shows the response of the heart and so far from being an outcast is included.

Jesus's initial reaction to the women is shocking (like his language to the Pharisees); he ignores her and then likens her (her people) to dogs! The disciples are no better; they want Jesus to heal her daughter just to get rid of her. Jesus sees his mission as to the people of Israel, albeit that from them the message will go out. Presumably he has come to this region to escape the joint worries of the Pharisees and the authorities out to get him and the crowds wanting to push him into being some sort of military leader. Here away from those pressures he can prepare himself and prepare the disciples for what is to come. This woman is a very unwelcome distraction, not part of his mission. For some people it is too shocking that Jesus could have been mistaken about his ministry (being only to the Jews) and so they see only a pretence of indifference and a mock insult to provoke a response from the women. They would suggest he may be has a glint in his eye as he turns away and smiles as he 'talks of dogs' –the Greek word used is more for a pet than a street dog. Either way she does respond and she responds with passion and wit and Jesus sees in her the true response of faith. There is nothing to suggest any faith in Jesus before meeting him; her calling him 'Son of David' probably indicates nothing more than ingratiating herself in a desperate desire for one she's heard about doing miracles as her last resort for her daughter. But as she encounters him and even stands up to him he sees faith that is so absent in the Pharisees. She claims no special place only need –the crumbs under the table we say we are not worthy to receive at Holy Communion; she says the crumbs under the table are enough. God says come not because you are worthy but because you have need to come and you are welcome at **the table** (never mind the crumbs).

What does all this say to us today?

While we are still excluded from our usual place of worship and even as we contemplate returning in much reduced circumstances, have we sort to hold on to our traditions, because so much about us has been changing. Do we think we somehow need to stay true to our ways of doing things and exclude the outside influences? Do we need to keep

to what we think is pure? The people returning from exile were told to include, to be just, and do right, and see God welcoming those they thought excluded, not just welcoming but giving a better remembrance and a place to serve and pray. Do we like the Pharisees want to preserve what we have created as the way of God when really it is no more than our traditions? Do we like the disciples want to be rid of the unfortunate distractions of people unlike us? What is our house of Prayer at the moment? Is it for all people? Will it still be when the building is in use again? Is it ours and we want to use it how we always have or is it a house of prayer for all people? How do we not just make sure we do not exclude but actually welcome those unlike us?

Who might it be that is excluded in our communities? Take a moment be honest with yourself, what is your equivalent of the food laws that you hang on to at the exclusion of real love?

Do you know what it is like to be excluded? Can you use that experience to include others rather than responding by setting up barriers of your own? If you have felt yourself excluded by Christians in the past (perhaps you still do) are there ways you can tell the rest of us your stories? Are the rest of us prepared that we might have to listen to such stories? Or would we be offended like the Pharisees. Remember Jesus didn't care that the Pharisees were offended.

Are we prepared to be shocked by Jesus's harsh words anymore, like those to and about the Pharisees? Are there times when we need to be harsh? I wonder if an example might be to those who refuse to accept the issues that led to the Black Life Matters movement. Can you think of others?

The Canaanite woman was persistent in her request to Jesus. No doubt that was because of her love for her daughter. Some would even see Jesus's mind was changed or at least he allowed her reaction to be a living parable of persistence. When should our prayers be like that? She was not seeking for herself nor did she think her case was more important than others (the crumbs under the table). Are these amongst the guiding principles for such insistent praying?

You might like to go back and read some of those last few paragraphs and the questions posed there. Pick one or two of the questions and spend some time with them either now or at some time in the week ahead.

Let us pray

Thus says the LORD: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

Loving God let your righteousness and you deliverance be in our hearts. Keep us from the hypocrisy of the form of religion. Open our eyes to see your welcome to all. Help us to know when to stand up for what is right even if that is offensive. Teach us to have such love that we may prayer with insistence. **Amen**

Prayers

We continue in prayers of thanksgiving and of intercession and petition.

Let us pray,

Living Lord,

we praise you that you are a God who loves.

You have given us a marvellous world,

to live in and to share with all your people.

You, O God, love everyone equally,

and we thank you that we are each unique.

We thank you that each one of us

has so much to give – and to receive – from each other.

Thank you for each new experience that you give us. **Amen.**

The Canaanite woman sought your help. She loved her daughter so much, she was so desperately in need, that she wouldn't give up till she had her answer. Lord, may we learn from this woman, to wait on you expectantly, patiently, persistently, doggedly. Grant us the courage of our convictions when we truly believe we are doing your will.

We pray in faith.

Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for your Church throughout the world and in our local communities. May your righteousness never be seen as mere form of religion. May the Church never fear to speak out against injustice. Guide those who decide how to respond to the current Pandemic; for the support of care for those in need in our fellowships and in the communities we serve; for stewardship of resources; for including people in, in church buildings and in other places.

We pray in faith.

Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for governments: national and local, for scientist and all involved in tackling the pandemic. Give them wisdom. Give them humility. We pray for people caught up in changing situations of quarantines and local lockdowns. We pray for those who are worried, those who are ill with COVID 19 or other conditions that they may not be too frightened to seek treatment. We pray for those who morn and we give thanks for the forget-me-nots planted in Kingston Park and all acts to help people remember.

We pray for the people of Lebanon, particularly in Beirut; for relief in emergency and good governacne.

As students receive grades for exams never taken we ask your blessing on them as individuals. We pray for those seeking reviews and for those advising them.

We pray in faith.

Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray today for those who feel excluded, whatever their situation, whatever the reason: for prisoners, refugees, the homeless; for the sick, the mentally unstable; for any who feel that they are outsiders.

And now we pause and pray for particular needs known to us.

We pray in faith.

Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

We pray for ourselves when our faith is weak, or we feel that we don't belong.

We pray in faith.

Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.

Amen.

Final Song

The final song speaks of the justice of the kingdom of God where outcasts are welcomed. "The kingdom of God is justice and joy"

1 The kingdom of God
is justice and joy,
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy ;
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know,
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

2 The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace,
the prisoners are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

3 The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice,
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice !
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross,
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

4 God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal,
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole ;
the heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call,
and all things cry glory
to God all in all

Bryn Rees (1911–1983)

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Final Prayer

As we came not in movement but in Spirit, let us now go in Spirit. Let us go resolved to love and love more; never to conform to the mere pattern of religion but for love to pour forth from our hearts. Love that cares enough to callout injustice as well as include the outcast. Love that is only possible if we go ...

In the knowledge of God, in the Love of God and with the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **AMEN.**

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