

St John's Home Worship for 19th July 2020

Today, our service follows the pattern of a Love Feast. The Love Feast, or Agape, is a Christian fellowship meal recalling the meals Jesus shared with disciples during his ministry. The service expresses the sharing, belonging and fellowship enjoyed within the body of Christ and typically includes the sharing of testimony and a simple meal (e.g. cake & juice/water). Although we once again gather from different places, we recognise the presence of God's spirit binding us into one community of love.

Psalm 34 verse 8:

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Song

King of kings, majesty
God of heaven living in me
Gentle saviour, closest friend
Strong deliverer, beginning and end
All within me falls at your throne

*Your majesty, I can but bow
I lay my all before you now
In royal robes I don't deserve
I live to serve your majesty*

Earth and heaven worship you
Love eternal faithful and true
Who bought the nations, ransomed souls
Brought this sinner near to your throne
All within me cries out in praise

Jarrold Cooper (c) 1996 Sovereign Lifestyle Music

Prayer

Loving God in this season of abundant growth and flourishing, we are aware of your life-giving and sustaining presence. Thank you heavenly father that in Jesus you came and lived amongst us, sharing the joys and sorrows of this earthly life. Thank you that through his life, death and resurrection you promise new and everlasting life to all who will accept it. Thank you for the presence of your Holy Spirit, guiding us, energising us and assuring us of your loving purpose for our lives.

We are sorry for all the times we doubt you and turn away from you in our determination to do things our own way. Thank you that you offer forgiveness freely to all who turn back to you in repentance. Help us to live in the light of your love, following your example and showing your love and compassion in our words and actions. Accept our praise and thanks this morning for we offer them in Jesus' powerful name. Amen

Reading Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So, when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow

together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.”

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Reflection

In a garden centre a while ago I spotted a little sign which said, “Garden of Weedin”. Of course, a pun on the name “Garden of Eden,” where Adam and Eve’s first sin triggered the devastating consequences of sin into the world, with the accompanying curse of thorns and thistles that made gardening and farming hard work. And ever since, gardeners and farmers have struggled against the constant spread of weeds. Weeding the garden was always one of my least favourite jobs as a youngster. My brother and I had our own little plot at the allotment and I loved digging and planting and watching things grow – but weeding – oh no. I remember never being quite sure I wasn’t pulling up the wrong thing by accident and the feeling of disappointment when I pulled up a half-grown radish or carrot along with the weed. Another problem was that the root would often snap off, leaving the weed to sprout up again. It really did seem like so much hard work, I would do anything to avoid it - going off to play in the stream was a favourite alternative. And yet I knew it had to be done if our little plot was going to produce anything worth eating.

I think we expect the world to work on the same principle, and for God, the divine gardener to get on and do a bit of weeding. How often do we hear, or say, ‘If God loves us then why doesn’t he do something about all the bad in the world?’, and just at the moment of course the big question, ‘Why doesn’t God do something about coronavirus?’ I’m sure we would all like to see the world cleaned up a bit - but of course the problem is that if God did ruthlessly pull out the ‘bad’ bits - we might be pulled out too - we might be pulled out because at this point we are too closely attached to one of the weeds, like those innocent radishes and carrots in my veg plot that had the potential to grow into something wonderful given a bit more time - or maybe we would be picked out because just at this moment we show rather a lot of characteristics of being weeds ourselves and we need the opportunity, the time, to choose to follow Jesus in order that we can continue to grow and mature in the way that we should.

To God, each one of us is incredibly precious - he created us, he planted us in this world and wants us to have the opportunity to flourish and reach our full potential - BUT in order for that to happen, he also has to allow the weeds to continue to grow too.

Another thing to consider is that, like the workers in our Bible reading, we are not reliably able to distinguish between the weeds and the wheat - there are many who look pious and who seem to be doing the ‘right thing’, they may even go to church, but they have not actually made the decision to follow Jesus and be part of his kingdom. On the other hand, I’m sure there are many who to us might appear selfish, cruel, ruthless - but who may have hearts that long to love and to be loved, and who will, given the opportunity, leap at the chance to respond to the gospel and to become disciples of Jesus. One of the big problems we have is that if we’re really honest we do tend to be a little bit complacent, pretty sure that despite appearances to the contrary, we are actually the wheat, the good guys, and that at the end of the day, God will see that in our heart of hearts we are good

and so of course we will be saved. But Scripture tells us very clearly, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8). The vicar of my childhood would often quote that to us youngsters whenever we objected to him saying each Sunday, 'come on then sinners'. We are sinners who should be seeking God's mercy - we certainly should not be the ones to judge what or who is good or bad in this world - firstly because we are not without fault ourselves and secondly because we can't reliably tell the difference. In today's parable Jesus didn't refer to just any old weeds, he named a specific type of weed, zizania, that in English we call darnel or tares. The thing about tares is that during the early growing stages of the weed and the wheat, they are almost identical. Therefore, it would be very risky to try and do any weeding at that point, because the good wheat could so easily be mistaken for tares, and vice versa. It's only at the harvest when the grain is fully ripe, that the poisonous black seeds of the tare make it easy to distinguish from the grains of good wheat. So it's only then that the tares are pulled out from among the wheat and taken to be burned, and the wheat left behind to be gathered into the barn.

Only God is in a position to judge between the wheat and the weeds, and at the right time, he will. We need to trust that there is a reason why good and bad seed continue to grow in the world - we need to focus on the fact that we are each precious to God to an extent that we can't even imagine, to commit ourselves to learning more about Jesus and the forgiveness and fullness of life that he is offering to us, and to ensure that we grow into a good and healthy crop. And the goal in all this for God, and for us, is that we might all, one day, be safely gathered in to live with him for eternity.

It always comes as such wonderful encouragement in this mixed up world, when we hear of someone coming to the point of choosing to follow Jesus, and so I'm absolutely delighted today to introduce Andrew who is going to tell us something of his story.

Andrew's testimony (*transcript of video*)

'Hello, my name's Andrew and this video is to explain how I found Christianity again after years of being an atheist. Although I was raised as a Christian by my parents I never really understood the faith properly, being a little kid. But when I hit being a teenager, things went a little bit wrong for me at home and at school, and it just made me very aggressive towards the world and everything. I then met another person who was just as angry at the world and angry with everything, and we started playing really aggressive music called death metal and we were leaning towards the satanism and we were just.. if there was a deity in control of everything we just wanted to rebel against it in every way we could. After I kind of came out of that however, I was an atheist for a very long time. That was until we moved to Newcastle. My wife Jane started bringing our two children Daniel and Amy to the Tinytots at this very church, and at one of the sessions when I was with her, I met Reverend Adele, and it was the first time I spoke to a religious leader without just feeling they were looking down on me for my taste in music or the fact that I was atheistic and didn't feel anything. But that wasn't the case with Adele obviously and she just liked having a chat with me, and enjoyed debating things to do with spirituality and religion with me, which really surprised me. Another session when I came with Jane I was suffering very badly from my depression and anxiety disorder, so I just sat in the corner out of the way, you know, keeping myself to myself as I usually do, especially when I feel that way. But Adele came over to me and we started talking, and it was really nice of her, in my head, to take the time out to see how I was doing. At the end of our conversation where I explained some of the things I just mentioned now, she said to me 'would you like me to pray for you?' Normally my gut instinct to that would be, 'No, of course not, I'm an atheist, I don't believe any of this', but for some reason, even if I didn't fully believe, I just liked the fact that someone cared, and said 'Yes, I would actually like that'. Not long after that though, I was starting to feel a pull towards having a faith again, but it wasn't quite Christianity. It was a pull towards Norse paganism which follows

the Scandinavian gods like Odin and Thor and Tia etc. And although it gave me a feeling that there was something more to what we can see and that there was a religion or a faith to have, or a belief to have, I didn't get on with the religious practices - I just felt there was a bit of a road block. While I was feeling this, the Simply Christianity Bible study course started at St John's, and Adele said to me 'I know you're following different spiritual paths but I'd love for you to come along and learn with us, and I love it when you start questioning, so we'd all love to have a back and forth with you. Well what happened while we were studying, however, is I was starting to feel more of a pull towards Christianity.. because I'd never studied the Bible before, I'd only heard what was wrong with Christianity from atheists, or the encyclopaedic style writings of what is meant to be generally said in the Bible or by Jesus. And by studying it myself a little bit and getting the answers to questions from real Christians rather than random people on the internet who just say 'listen to me or you're going to hell', it really made my head turn around. I said to Adele before one of the sessions, 'I think I want to embrace Christianity again'. And there was this nice prayer that the people of the course gave me at the end of one of the sessions that really made me feel better in everything. And now, feeling like I'm a proper Christian, I'm not as aggressive or angry as I was before, and trying to lead a more Christian lifestyle has actually helped me a lot. And I'm hoping that other people that might feel like I used to could take a bit of an influence from an ex death metal satanic guy who then found Christianity again, and hopefully have a better outlook on everything just like I now have thanks to Christ and God.

Sharing Food and Drink

We are going to take some time now to reflect on what we've heard, and to remember the patience and the grace of God who doesn't want to lose even one of us. So I invite you to enjoy your your cuppa or juice and your cake, aware that others will be doing the same. If you're with someone you might like to chat about what you've heard, or maybe share some of your own story, or you may prefer just to be quiet for a few minutes, to recognise God's presence with you and to listen to what he might be saying to you.

I will say a prayer and then we'll eat and drink together...

God thank you that you are patient and attentive, that each of us is precious to you and that you don't want any of us to be lost. We thank you for Andrew, for his decision to follow Jesus, and pray that you will protect and nurture him that he might grow in faith and continue to be a powerful witness to others. We thank you too, for this food and drink and for the opportunity to reflect on your goodness and love. Amen

(music)

Aware that the world is not yet as it should be, as the weeds and wheat continue to grow side by side until the final harvest, we turn to God in prayer for ourselves and for others.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in this world where hopes are so often dashed and dreams so often broken, we remember today the faith in the future you brought to so many, both through your coming and through your resurrection from the dead.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded, **may hope flower again.**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for our Church and for other churches too, who are wondering what the future will hold for them. Help us through this time when we are unable to use our building, to remember that we are still one in you. Help us to feel the sense of community and belonging that come from being joined by your Spirit, and show us how to care for one another so that no-one feels excluded. Guide us as we seek the way forward

so that we can truly serve your purpose in our community and spread the Good News of your love.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded, **may hope flower again.**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for the wider world where so many are hungry, fearful, and suffering at the hands of others. We ask that those in positions of power and influence might be guided by your Spirit as they make decisions that affect the wellbeing of those around them. Help us not to become indifferent to the plight of the brothers and sisters we cannot see, but to reach out in love, speaking out against injustice and being generous in sharing our resources.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded, **may hope flower again.**

Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for all those who are unwell, suffering the pain of bereavement, or simply weary with the way things are. Help us all, as the effects of coronavirus continue to wreak havoc with businesses, finances, and with physical and mental health. By your Holy Spirit, bring healing, and comfort and peace. (pause)

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded, **may hope flower again.**

Lord Jesus Christ, the world is waiting, hurting, longing, searching for hope, crying out for meaning, hungry for some reason to believe in the future. Come again in your living power, and bring new life to all.

Lord Jesus, where faith has died and dreams have faded, **may hope flower again. Amen**

Our final song speaks of the amazing lengths that God was prepared to go to in order that we might all have the opportunity to turn to him and find new life...

Song

I will sing of the Lamb, of the price that was paid for me,
Purchased by God, giving all he could give!
Here now I stand in the garments of righteousness;
Death has no hold, for in Jesus I live.

I will sing of his blood that flows for my wretchedness,
Wounds that are bared, that I may be healed;
Power and compassion, the marks of his ministry;
May they be mine as I harvest his field.

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
my heart fills with wonder, my mouth fills with praise!
Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

Once I was blind, yet believed I saw everything,
Proud in my ways, yet a fool in my part;
Lost and alone in the company of multitudes,
Life in my body, yet death in my heart.

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
Oh, why should the King save a sinner like me?
Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

What shall I give to the man who gave everything,
Humbling himself before all he had made?
Dare I withhold my own life from his sovereignty?
I shall give all for the sake of his name!

*Oh, I will sing of the Lamb. Oh, I will sing of the Lamb.
I'll sing of his love for the rest of my days!
Hallelujah, hallelujah. Hallelujah, hallelujah.*

SoF 856 Stuart Townend © 1997 Thankyou Music

Closing prayer

Excerpt from: Nick Fawcett. "For Such a Time as This". Apple Books.

"Hold on to us, Lord,
through this troubled time.
Where there is sickness,
may there also be health.
Where there are tears,
may there also be laughter.
Where there is despair,
may there also be hope.
Where there is fear,
may there also be trust.
Where there is hardship,
may there also be help.
Where there is doubt,
may there also be faith.
Where there is weakness,
may there also be strength.
Where there is defeat,
may there also be victory.
Where there is chaos,"
"may there also be calm.
Where there are problems,
may there also be solutions.
Where there is distancing in body,
may there also be a coming together in spirit.
Where there is death,
may there also be life.
Come, Lord, and work your miracle of love,
out of darkness bringing light.
Amen."