

St John's Home Worship

30th August 2020

If you are worshipping with others, you may wish to say the words in bold type together.

Welcome to our worship this morning. Hebrews chapter 10 says, 'Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings,' and it tells us that, because of Jesus, we can come into the Father's presence. Whether you come as someone who's been a believer for a long time, or as someone who is just beginning to explore the journey of faith, know that God our Father welcomes you. We're going to begin with a song which is a prayer asking God to help us to come into his presence. You might like to listen to it on Youtube, here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pUSbgFc_WXw or simply read the words as a prayer.

Jesus, lead us to the Father by your Spirit.

Help us draw near.

As we come with awe and gladness,

Help us draw near.

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Help us draw near.

(Sam Hargreaves, © Sam Hargreaves / RESOUNDworship.org)

We praise God in words from Psalm 105.

¹ **O give thanks to the Lord and call upon his name;
make known his deeds among the peoples.**

² **Sing to him, sing praises,
and tell of all his marvellous works.**

³ **Rejoice in the praise of his holy name;
let the hearts of them rejoice who seek the Lord.**

⁴ **Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his face continually.**

⁵ **Remember the marvels he has done,
his wonders and the judgements of his mouth.**

Psalm 105: 1-5 (Common Worship)

God our Father, as we come to you today, we thank you that you are with us wherever we are. You are worthy of all the praise and worship and honour that we can give, and much, much more. You call us, and you challenge us, and you change us. Please help us to worship you and to learn from your Word. Help us to remember what you have done for us, and to give you thanks. In Jesus' name, **Amen.**

Reading: Romans 12: 9-21 (NIV)

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. ¹⁷ Do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' ²⁰ says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'
²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Our Gospel reading is from Matthew 16. Immediately before this passage, Jesus and his disciples have come to a place called Caesarea Philippi, and there Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who are people saying that I am?' They tell him that some say one thing, some another. Some say he's a prophet, some say he's John the Baptist. And then he asks, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Reading: Matthew 16: 21-28 (NIV)

²¹ From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

²² Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!'

²³ Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

²⁴ Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save their life[☞] will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.

²⁸ 'Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Reflection

Have you ever thought you knew what was happening, and then realised that things are actually very different? That's what happens to the disciples in today's gospel reading. In some ways, Matthew 16 is a turning point in Matthew's gospel. Jesus has been travelling and preaching. Vast crowds have followed him. He's healed their sick and taught them about the kingdom. He's calmed storms, walked on water, and fed thousands of people from a few small loaves. His popularity is huge, but he's also met with opposition from the authorities. And then at Caesarea Philippi, Peter makes that great declaration of faith: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus commends Peter, and says it's the Father who has shown him this – but he also tells the disciples not to let anyone know that he's the Messiah.

But after that, as we come to today's passage, Jesus starts to tell them alarming things. He's got to go to Jerusalem where he'll suffer at the hands of the authorities. He'll be killed, and be raised to life on the third day. Just think how *distressed* they must be at what Jesus is saying. Their friend, their leader, the person they've committed their lives to as his disciples, says he's going to die. They must be stunned. And also, he's just confirmed that he's the Messiah. So how can that be? Messiah is supposed to set the people free and make their nation independent again! He's supposed to win! He's not supposed to be killed! As for being raised to life, perhaps they don't understand it - they'll have to be reminded of it when it actually happens.

Peter takes Jesus aside. "This can't happen to you!" But Jesus, who's so recently commended him for understanding who Jesus is, now rebukes him in shocking words. "Get behind me, Satan!" And he says that Peter is a stumbling block – someone who could trip him up and get in the way of him doing what he has to do. Jesus says, "you do not have in mind the concerns of God but merely human concerns." I don't know how Peter felt about that, but I imagine in his place I'd have felt rather hurt. It's natural to

want to stop bad things from happening to your friends, and surely God wants to set free those who are oppressed? But between his love and concern for Jesus, and his own preconceptions of what Jesus has come to do, Peter has basically told Jesus that he's misunderstood his own mission. Of course it's actually Peter who's not seeing the far larger purpose that Jesus has, and what it would cost. God's plan was that Jesus would die on the cross, and so make it possible for all people to be reconciled with God. That was far more important than dealing with the political situation. Do we ever limit what God can do through us, or others, by our assumptions, or by rejecting new ideas? Sometimes, as we seek to follow the Lord, it may be those people who are most concerned for us and genuinely want our good, who urge us to play it safe – and perhaps miss out on what God has in store for us.

But Jesus has more to say about sacrifice. It isn't only him who may have to suffer. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For who ever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world but forfeit their soul." And he talks of his return, and of rewarding each person according to what they've done.

The disciples hadn't yet seen Jesus crucified, but they knew about crosses. They knew that if you got to the point of picking up your cross, then there was only one place that you were going to end up, and that was on it. Those who had to take up their own cross were condemned. Jesus had just told his disciples that he was going to his death – now he's telling them that they must be prepared to follow him there. And in fact, early Christian tradition has it that only one or two of those original twelve died a natural death. But this challenge that Jesus gives isn't just for them – it's for whoever wants to be a disciple of Jesus. That means it's for us, too.

So, as his disciples today, what does this mean for us? For many of our fellow Christians, risk is a daily reality. But for all of us, to deny ourselves and take up the cross is about counting our own lives as less important than Christ and his kingdom. If we aren't ourselves called upon to die for him, we are most certainly called upon to live for him, giving of ourselves day by day for him and for others. And we're to follow him : the road that he calls us to take, the road of self-sacrifice and service, is one that he has already walked.

What does it look like, that day by day giving of ourselves? Jesus has more to say about it in the Gospels, but today's other reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, gives a good picture, too. Holding fast to what is good, hating evil but caring for enemies, generosity, hospitality, humility, living in love and peace instead of taking revenge on those who have hurt us - there's a lot there that requires self-giving. And Paul takes it for granted that Christians aren't promised an easy life.

But if there's a cost to following, if there are risks to following, what about the cost of not following? Jesus says, 'Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.' We can see that in terms of finding the life that God offers – eternal life, with him. But even now, day by day, it's often when we take the risk of obeying – of doing what we read in God's word, or taking the time to pray, or following that nudge of the Spirit – that we see God in action, and maybe grow in faith as a result. Tom Wright puts it like this:

"Following him will cost everything and give everything. There are no half measures on this journey. It's going to be like learning to swim: if you keep your foot on the bottom of the pool you'll never work out how to do it. You have to lose your life to find it."

Prayers.

As we turn to our prayers, you might like to spend some quiet time reflecting on the challenge of Jesus' call, and on your own response.

God our Father, we come to you in sorrow for our sins.
For turning away from you, and ignoring your will for our lives;
Father, forgive us: **save us and help us.**
For behaving just as we wish, without thinking of you;
Father, forgive us: **save us and help us.**
For failing you by what we do, and think and say;
Father, forgive us: **save us and help us.**
For letting ourselves be drawn away from you by temptations in the world about us;
Father, forgive us: **save us and help us.**
For living as if we were ashamed to belong to your Son;
Father, forgive us: **save us and help us.**

May the God of love bring *us* back to himself, forgive us our sins, and assure us of his eternal love
in Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** (Common Worship)

Lord, we thank you and we praise you, because however unstable or uncertain our situation may appear, however much the world around us changes, and however insecure we sometimes may feel, you are unchanging and eternal. Your love never changes. Your mercy never changes. Your power never runs out, and your light never grows dim. We pray that we may hold onto that love. We pray that we may trust you, whatever may trouble us, and whatever new things are happening, today, and every day of our lives.

We continue to pray for those affected by the Coronavirus – not only those who are ill, but those whose lives and livelihoods have been disrupted. We pray today for schools and those who work in them, as they prepare this week for the start of the new term. We pray for businesses, trying to make their workplaces safe for employees and customers. We pray for those whose jobs have been lost or whose hours have been cut, for those who find it hard to work from home, and those who are nervous about returning to the workplace. Lord, give them wisdom and peace, and provide for their needs. We pray for those who are carrying out research into vaccines and treatments, and for the authorities as they decide what measures are needed. Grant them your wisdom, and clear minds to think through difficult questions under pressure.

We pray too for those who are ill. We remember in a moment of silence those we know who are unwell or facing difficulties at the moment, and we pray for them. ... Lord surround them with your love, and bring them healing, strength and peace.

God be about us, behind and before,
and enfold all these for whom we have prayed
in your all-powerful love,
Amen.

If you would like to listen to or join in another worship song, *Everyone needs compassion* is on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnXX8TbUX-E>.

Finally, we pray for each other wherever we may be:

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, evermore. Amen.**

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