

17th May 2020 – Morning Service

“What is Church” Mini Series - Week 1: Church - a Pilgrim People

Welcome & Call to worship - Ephesians 2:19–22

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

We gather as the people of God to worship God

StF 455 - All My Hope on God is founded

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| 1) All my hope on God is founded;
He doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth,
Only good and only true.
God unknown, He alone
Calls my heart to be his own. | 3) God's great goodness aye endureth,
Deep his wisdom passing thought;
Splendour, light, and life attend him,
Beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore from his store
New-born worlds rise and adore. |
| 2) Human pride and earthly glory,
Sword and crown betray our trust;
What with care and toil we fashion,
Tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour,
Is my temple and my tower. | 4) Still from earth to God eternal
Sacrifice of praise be done,
High above all praises praising
For the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call, one and all
Ye who follow shall not fall. |

Robert Bridges

Opening prayers

Creator God, maker of all that is, we offer you our praise:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You brought light out of darkness, day for our fulfilment and night for our rest:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You raised the mountains, laid low the plains, filled the seas with life and sprinkled the sky with stars:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You formed people; children, women and men, diverse, complex, creative and beautiful:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You did not abandon us to chaos, but remain intimately involved in our story:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You revealed your love in the life of your Son, your Word made flesh, living among us:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

You move within our lives as Holy Spirit, opening our eyes to your grace and truth.

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Creator God, maker of all that is, we offer you our praise:

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Accept our praise in Christ's name.

Amen.

Reflection: Tradition



Who is this?

Answer: *Topol – from the film: Fiddler on the roof*

At one point he says: "Tradition! Tradition! Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years. We have traditions for everything... how to eat, how to sleep, even, how to wear clothes. For instance, we always keep our heads covered and always wear a little prayer shawl... This shows our constant devotion to God. You may ask; how did this tradition start? I'll tell you - I don't know. But it's a tradition... Because of our traditions, everyone knows who they are and what God expects us to do."

We are thinking today about the balance between church tradition and church as a pilgrim people...

Q: Take a moment to reflect for yourself... what are some the traditions in your church or in you?

Things we always do the same way?

- 'What do you like about that tradition?
- How does that tradition help you - in worship, in your faith?

We have many traditions - at home - at Church

- They are good
- They give us a sense of comfort
- They put us in a particular frame of mind
- They help us to know where we are, what's coming up
- **They can challenge us - eg the tradition of giving something up for Lent!**
- They provide a framework for the structure of our year, our services the way we treat each other...

In my training – was with Anglicans who have some very strong traditions

BUT one thing a colleague said that struck with me: Sometimes – we follow our traditions blindly, without understanding why... because we've always done it this way?

- that's when faith can become empty
- that's when we can sometimes fail to see if what we are doing is actually helpful or not?

SO Let's not be afraid to talk to each other and to God about **why do we do it this way?**

- I wonder - is there a new and better way?

Prayers of Thanksgiving

Lord of eternity,

We give thanks for the traditions of our Church – for their richness and gathered wisdom over many years.

- Our open welcome to all – for all are welcome, all are valued and all can be saved.
- Our tradition of service – feeding and helping those in need and fighting for social justice.
- Our tradition of engaging in questioning and growing in our faith through small groups gathered for prayer and bible study.
- Our tradition of great singing and music which lifts the spirit and renews our faith.

Above all here and now – we give thanks:

For those who are new to faith

For the energy and life they bring

For the questions they ask

That they might grow and be blessed as Christians called Methodists

But that they may also challenges us to see our church and our faith, our traditions with fresh eyes...

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God forgive us when:

Our traditions become ropes that bind us and blind us.

Our traditions stop us from seeing what is possible if we were to trust in you and step out in faith.

Forgive us when our faith and church life settles into a rut - that does not change and is not renewed. When our ears are closed to your still small voice. Help us not be like the Pharisees - who were eager to condemn others and more keen on tradition than on knowing you.

Forgive us for those times when we have thought – but we always do it this way...

May we know the forgiveness Christ offers, and in that forgiveness may transformation begin. **Amen**

StF 489 - All I once held dear

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| 1) All I once held dear,
Built my life upon,
All this world reveres,
And wars to own,
All I once thought gain
I have counted loss;
Spent and worthless now,
Compared to this. | 2) Now my heart's desire
Is to know you more,
To be found in you
And known as yours.
To possess by faith
What I could not earn,
All-surpassing gift
Of righteousness. |
| Ch) <i>Knowing you, Jesus,
Knowing you,
There is no greater thing.
You're my all, you're the best,
You're my joy, my righteousness,
And I love you, Lord.</i> | 3) Oh, to know the power
Of your risen life,
And to know you in
Your sufferings.
To become like you
In your death, my Lord,
So with you to live
And never die. |

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Reading: Exodus 16:1-3 - God's people look back with rose tinted glasses

The whole congregation of the Israelites set out from Elim; and Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Reading: Acts 11:1-18 - Peter is called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles

Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, 'Get up, Peter; kill and eat.' But I replied, 'By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But a second time the voice answered from heaven, 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane.' This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his

house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.' And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life."

Reflection: the Church a pilgrim people

We are a pilgrim people. Rooted in the long-standing, Biblical, nomadic tradition of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's chosen people had been in slavery in Egypt, they were subject to terrible conditions and God worked many miracles to enable their escape and freedom. And yet only one and half months after they had departed we find them moaning and groaning to Moses. Looking back at their time in Egypt and imagining it to be better than their current freedom in the wilderness... Rose tinted glasses - they existed then and they are still around today.... We seem to have an amazing and historically enduring capability to imagine the past as being better than today. There are so many things that we do in church life - often unconsciously - that represent traditions. Perhaps we sit in the same place? We've always had the communion table there? We use archaic language that is difficult for visitors to understand. We do things without explaining them... But we've always done it this way...God knew this when tackling one of the biggest challenges of the early church. In Acts 11 God calls Peter to take the Gospel to the Gentiles - the uncircumcised! Outsiders, people who don't belong, people who are not of our faith or tradition, people who don't understand the way we do things. People who weren't born by blood into the family of God...It's hard for us to imagine just how radical this calling was - and Peter was heavily criticised. So what does God do - to challenge the traditional view that Jesus Christ was the Messiah - only of God's chosen people - that Jesus was theirs and no one else's! God takes one of the greatest most powerful, long-standing, deep rooted traditions of his people - the laws of clean and unclean eating and breaks them! For God to encourage such a thing must have been incredible, outrageous, unimaginable.... Indeed we see this and sense this in Peter's reaction to God's command to get up, kill, and eat. By no means Lord - he protests! Nothing unclean has ever entered my mouth! God was saying - it's time! It's time to look at things in a new way! But of course - whenever traditions are challenged - people get upset - these things are dear to us - so we must always walk and talk with respect and grace.

Some of you will have heard me tell this story, but in the 1970s the Methodist Church brought out a hymnbook called Hymns and Psalms. It soon became a great favourite, full of Wesley's hymns and rich in theology in song. As a young local preacher I always remember being reminded by my tutor to make sure that I had included a Wesley hymn and heaven forbid that I should do a service without one! Then along came Singing the Faith! And I cannot tell you how many complaints I heard about it! These new modern songs are so short lived, they have no staying power and what about their theology? There were even people counting the number of Wesley hymns and quoting the terrible reduction in Wesley percentage in the new hymnbook! Now we know that Charles Wesley alone wrote around 6000 hymns; that's equal to 115 years singing one new hymn every week OR or 16 years writing and singing a new hymn every DAY. What does that tell us? It tells us that Charles believed in expressing his faith in poetry and song; that he believed in re-expressing his faith and capturing the essence of his brother's sermons every week, for new situations and for new people, responding in a memorable way to the issues and challenges of the moment.

Charles was the Graham Kendrick of his day. He fully accepted that most of his work was short lived and for an immediate purpose. I imagine that Charles might be a bit disappointed to find we are still clinging onto his old hymns... YES - of course a few remain because they are classics BUT if Charles were here today I wonder what would he be saying to us?

I imagine he would be saying: where are the hymn writers and poets in your church? What new songs have you written to capture your experience of God today? How are we re-expressing our faith AFRESH in every new generation...

“Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, in perfect harmony, the man who is God...”

What more beautiful poetry can we imagine that these words, words that capture the amazing mystery of our Lord Jesus Christ - human and divine. Not written hundreds of years ago but in our generation... Please don't get me wrong - tradition is good! Tradition is the gathered experience of many respected Christians over many generations. It sets out who we are and how we live out our faith. It is the compass of our path and the test of things new...But sometimes - we can become so focused on 'how we've always done it', that we forget why. And change becomes difficult...

As Church - the body of Christ, called together as one - with Christ as our cornerstone - we are a pilgrim people... And one of the consequences of placing our lives into the hands of God and choosing Christ's narrow way is that nothing ever stays the same. The amazing Ignatian writer Margaret Silf puts it wonderfully like this: **God's future for us is not discovered but created and the journey there changes both the traveller and the destination.**

Sisters and brothers - we sit amidst the chaos, uncertainty and grief of COVID-19. In July it is possible that we will be allowed to meet again in worship and many may hope that we might return to church as it was before all this began. We rightly cling to the comfort of that image...But the reality is that Church may never be the same again. In the short term it will not be worship as we know it. Social distancing will radically affect our sense of place and fellowship and will limit how many of us can gather together. Shielding will mean that many of our beloved preachers may not be safe or able to come out and lead us. Yet despite all of this we are surrounded by incredible creativity within the church and a spiritual rebirth overflowing in our community. Thousands volunteering, people standing on their doorsteps applauding the NHS, everywhere neighbours reaching out in kindness and generosity of spirit. Revival is on our doorstep.

So I wonder - in the COVID-19 world - what dream God may be showing us that mirrors Peter's? What traditions might God be calling us to let go of? I wonder - what are some of the things we have done in the past that might limit God's work with us and through us? I wonder - with excitement and a little uncertainty - what path God is calling us to travel down. And I wonder - will I look back, with rose tinted glasses - or will I have faith and look forward - trusting in God.

Come - lets join hands together - even though we cannot do so physically. And step out in faith. May we pray together – Lord build our church. And may we accept gracefully the change this pilgrimage requires. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord we pray for the world that you created.

May we see things always through the eyes of faith.

We pray for those in authority that they may always be open to creative and new solutions to long-standing issues such as poverty, inequality and war.

That the world may be a better place for all its children.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

We pray for those throughout the world who believe in the gospel.

That they and we may grow in grace and humanity.

We pray for all churches, that they may not lay up treasures on earth or become monuments to a past age clinging to what is already dead and remote from the people of today.

May we be open to the Holy Spirit who witnesses to Jesus Christ as the light, life, hope and peace of this world.

Help us as your church to be prepared to doing things in a new way both now and into the future. Help us to see that the church will not go back to what it was but that you are calling us forward to something new.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Lord we pray for our own communities in the midst of crisis.

We give thanks for the amazing creativity being shown by so many in seeking to support life and well-being in the shadow of COVID-19.

We remember especially families known to us and in our community who are mourning at this time or who have loved ones who are unwell. We remember especially those who work in and support the NHS, our schools and other vital services and those engaged in caring.

Lord in your mercy hear our prayer

Accept these prayers for the sake of your son, our saviour - Jesus Christ **Amen**

The Lord's Prayer

StF 470 - Lord for the Years

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| 1) Lord, for the years
Your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us,
Cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us,
Pardoned and provided,
Lord of the years,
We bring our thanks today. | 4) Lord, for our world,
When we disown and doubt Him,
Loveless in strength
And comfortless in pain;
Hungry and helpless,
Lost indeed without Him,
Lord of the world,
We pray that Christ may reign. |
| 2) Lord, for that Word,
The Word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts
And sets our souls ablaze.
Teaches and trains,
Rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the Word,
Receive Your people's praise. | 5) Lord, for ourselves;
In living power remake us,
Self on the cross
And Christ upon the throne.
Past put behind us,
For the future take us,
Lord of our lives,
To live for Christ alone. |
| 3) Lord, for our land,
In this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by
Pleasure, wealth and care;
For young and old,
For commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land,
Be pleased to hear our prayer. | |

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Blessing

Go in the name of the Lord

Hear his voice, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, respond to His call

That we may ever move forward, following the way of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**