

# 20<sup>th</sup> September 2020 – Morning Service

Rev Alan Combes

## Emerging Church in Acts – Finding our Feet

### Call to Worship - Colossians 1:15–18 - Christ Supreme

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our calling to walk closely in the very footsteps of Christ, learning from him, not only listening to his teaching, but following his example. 477 Teach me to dance.

### StF 477 – Teach me to dance

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| <p><i>Ch) Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart,<br/>Teach me to move in the pow'r of Your Spirit.<br/>Teach me to walk in the light of Your presence,<br/>Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.<br/>Teach me to love with Your heart of<br/>compassion<br/>Teach me to trust in the word of Your promise<br/>Teach me to hope in the day of Your coming<br/>Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.</i></p> | <p>2) Let all my movements express<br/>A heart that loves to say 'Yes',<br/>A will that leaps to obey You.<br/>Let all my energy blaze<br/>To see the joy in Your face<br/>Let my whole being praise You,<br/>Praise You.</p> |
| <p>1) You wrote the rhythm of life,<br/>Created heaven and earth;<br/>In You is joy without measure.<br/>So like a child in Your sight,<br/>I dance to see Your delight<br/>For I was made for Your pleasure,<br/>Pleasure.</p>  |   |

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### Opening Prayers

If you have access to a copy of Singing the Faith turn to section 544 – 567. As you scan these hymns perhaps find something that proclaims our/your commitment to God and God's commitment to supporting the church! Take a moment to give thanks...

Almighty God - your love is beyond measure. You are the source of all goodness and grace. You are the Lord of Sea and Sky - in you and through your Son Jesus - were all things made. You have given each one of us your Holy Spirit - the breath of life within us.

Wonderful God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, cutting through our own sinful humanity and from the depths of your love for us - you knock at the door of our very hearts and invite us to be part of your family the church with Christ as our head. You call us to journey together as one body, as ordinary people. You give all that we need and you are the source of all that we may become. We place back into your hands all the God given potential that we hold, so that through you - we may be extraordinary people who do extraordinary things in your name and for your glory. **Amen.**

## Prayer of Confession

Lord, bring us to our knees - that our pride might be broken. Bring us to our knees - that we might become truly humble before you. Bring us to our knees - that we might see our true dependence upon you. Forgive us for those times when we fail to see the deep and fundamental connection between your creation and your word in Jesus - and so we fail to be good stewards of your creation. Forgive us for how often we fail to take up the cross of discipleship and the stewardship of your gospel - especially when the good news of Christ is so desperately needed in your world today. Forgive us when we fail to be faithful members of your church - the bride of Christ, one community of many parts. We are not always good stewards of the physical and spiritual gifts that you have given to each one of us. We are especially sorry that sometimes we don't appreciate that all of us have strengths and weaknesses, that none of us are perfect and yet that you love each one of us equally. Gracious God - we have much to praise you for and to thank you for. We are reminded in our hymns and readings that Jesus has shown himself to be our friend and saviour. So we ask that you will help us not to disown him but to welcome him. To see him afresh and to rejoice in his presence.

This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. ( 1 Timothy 1:15) Hear then Christ's word of grace to us: Our sins are forgiven. Thanks be to God.

Through your son Jesus - bring us back to our feet. Through the fruits of the Holy Spirit enable us to enter into the beginnings of the secrets of your love. Let the small stream of our love be filled to overflowing by the immense flood of your being.

## StF 611 – Brother, sister let me serve you

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| 1) Brother, sister let me serve you<br>Let me be as Christ to you;<br>Pray that I may have the grace<br>To let you be my servant, too.             | 4) I will weep when you are weeping,<br>When you laugh I'll laugh with you;<br>I will share your joy and sorrow<br>Till we've seen this journey through. |
| 2) We are pilgrims on a journey,<br>And companions on the road;<br>We are here to help each other<br>Walk the mile and bear the load.              | 5) When we sing to God in heaven<br>We shall find such harmony,<br>Born of all we've known together<br>Of Christ's love and agony.                       |
| 3) I will hold the Christ light for you<br>In the night-time of your fear;<br>I will hold my hand out to you,<br>Speak the peace you long to hear. | 6) Brother, sister let me serve you<br>Let me be as Christ to you;<br>Pray that I may have the grace<br>To let you be my servant, too.                   |

*Richard A M Gillard © 1977 Scripture in Song CCL No. 515642*

## Reading: Acts 2:37-47

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

## Sermon

If you are anything like me, I seem to have spent so much of my recent time wrestling with our Covid context, wishing things were different instead of listening to Jesus, who reconciles us to our situation and calls us to find God's purpose in the day that is before us.

I wonder then how does the church find its feet in the midst of lockdown and as we attempt to emerge from lockdown in due course? In response to this I find myself drawn to the early days of the church in the book of Acts. There are strong parallels as we witness the disciples locked down, fearful of the power of the Romans and the Jewish Council, knowing that to go out and proclaim their risen Lord will be very dangerous.

Often - when read this passage from Acts there is a temptation to respond by trying to recreate the exact community it describes. To take the aspects of this particular Christian community and create from them a prescription for ourselves and communities around us.

PROBLEM - by doing this we take a story of faith and turn it into a standard of obedience. We must be this way – exactly – or we are not doing it right? One commentator writes: it's like turning the wine of joy at the wedding of Cana back into the water of ritual.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes about this passage in Acts where he says: Christian brother (and sister)hood is not an ideal which we must realize; rather it is a reality created by God in Christ in which we may participate. In other words – as we explore Acts in the context of Lockdown to see what we can learn and what comfort and guidance the early church bring us, as it emerges whilst under pressure and in and from Lockdown... The trick – according to Bonhoeffer is not to try and copy what they did - rather we are called to create our own reality today, our own version, rooted in Christ's teaching and example.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906 to a prominent German family. He was a tall man, with an athletic physique and a round boyish face. With his mother's blue eyes and blond hair he was a potentially perfectly fit for the Third Reich.

BUT Bonhoeffer was a man of deep faith who knew all about lockdown... He became a Lutheran pastor and with the rise to power of Hitler in 1933, Bonhoeffer became known for his staunch resistance to Nazi dictatorship and his vocal opposition to Hitler's genocidal persecution of the Jews. Sadly, around him the national protestant union of churches passed a resolution such that pastors and church officials of Jewish descent were removed from their posts. SO he became an outspoken early member of the Confessing Church which reaffirmed Christ at its head – not Hitler. Cutting - long story short, in 1943 he was arrested by the Gestapo, imprisoned and sadly killed in 1945 just as the regime was collapsing...

In the face of intense pressure, locked down and at great risk Bonhoeffer sought the renewal of the German church. By focussing on these themes from Acts 2:

First, focus on what really matters. ie Get the basics right V37 Now when they heard this... THIS being Peter's Sermon to the crowd proclaiming and affirming Jesus as the Messiah. When under pressure – facing the unknown, let's bring Jesus back to the centre of church life and personal faith. Lets affirm who

Jesus is, what Jesus has done for us. Returning to the core of the journey of faith: V38 Repent and be baptised so that we may be forgiven and can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Second - Bonhoeffer says: Rejoice. Remember and recall the greatness of God V43 Awe came upon everyone. Bonhoeffer wrote to his fiancé from prison saying: be cheerful, be patient and brave." He went on: "even amidst hardship, a joyful optimism can prevail." In his famous prison poem, "Who am I?" the opening stanza reads: "They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house."

To rejoice in God is to reaffirm our perspective. Whatever our troubles, hardship or loss, God is with us & worthy of our praise.

Third, Bonhoeffer says: embrace optimism. If you re-read verses 44-47, This is an incredible image of optimism. You can just feel it rising from the page. Despite all the first Christians had been through. Bonhoeffer's approach to prison life was not to allow the confinement to restrict his activity. He literally, did not sit still while waiting for his hope for freedom to materialise.

I wonder then - how we together might find optimism, be optimistic, share optimism with each other and with the world around us that is so desperately in need of optimism right now? I don't have the answers - but let us seek that optimism together...

As we seek to find our feet as a church IN lockdown, may we keep Christ at the centre of all we do, rejoicing in God and sharing the optimism of our faith with a world in need. Amen.

*(Based on original work by Brian Rosner - Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne.)*

## **Prayers of Intercession**

Comforting God, shepherd of your flock. We thank you for the gift of Jesus – both human and divine, who shows us by words and actions a glimpse of your true glory. Seemingly without power or authority in the modern structures of this world, and yet all creation was made through him. Mother God help us to see Christ in each other. We pray for the Children of the earth - so many in poverty, neglect, forced into wars and slavery. We pray for those we find hard to love, those on the fringes of society - the neglected, the mentally ill, the disabled - may we have the courage and strength to show your love where others do not.

L: The Lord is here **R: *The Lord is present***

Holy Spirit - we pray for those who seek to lift up their voices in seeking justice, freedom, respect and stability honest political structures. We read so often of the greed of people driving entire nations to destruction. As just one example, we pray for Sudan - a country rich in mineral wealth but whose people have been destroyed by years of civil war. Lord help us to bring light and hope to difficult places and to believe in your presence in these places.

L: The Lord is here **R: *The Lord is present***

Almighty God - creator and ruler of all - grant strength to those who face times of trouble or uncertainty. We remember other countries in the world where there is unrest - we remember especially North and South Korea, Iran, Egypt, Iraq and Afghanistan. We pray for sincere, honest and trustworthy leaders. We live in hope and seek to bring hope to these troubled areas of the world.

L: The Lord is here **R: *The Lord is present***

Jesus the word - friend and sustainer of those for whom life is fading, those who are weighed down with grief, smooth the uneven ground for the weak and the lonely. For those whose jobs and lives are under threat in these difficult times. We pray especially for the strength of communities and families - that we may as a Church play our part in the cohesion of our local communities. Holy Spirit speak with us and for us as we bring to God those whom we name on our lips and in the silence of our hearts and those whose troubles are known only to you;

L: The Lord is here **R: *The Lord is present***

## The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,  
hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come;  
thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our trespasses,  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the  
glory for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name, your kingdom come,  
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are  
yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

## StF 682 – God of grace and God of glory

- 1) God of grace and God of glory,  
On your people pour your power;  
Crown your ancient church's story;  
Bring her bud to glorious flower.  
Grant us wisdom,  
Grant us courage,  
For the facing of this hour.
- 2) Heal your children's warring madness;  
Bend our pride to your control;  
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,  
Rich in things and poor in soul.  
Grant us wisdom,  
Grant us courage,  
Lest we miss your kingdom's goal.

- 3) Lo, the hosts of evil round us  
Scorn your Christ, assail his ways!  
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;  
Free our hearts to work and praise.  
Grant us wisdom,  
Grant us courage,  
For the living of these days.

*Harry Emerson Fosdick © Stephen F Downs CCL No. 515642*

## Blessing

Christ is the hope of the world. So let us go into the world, together as the Church in his name, to share his story of good news. By the grace of God and in the power of the Spirit **Amen**