

23rd August 2020 – Morning Service

Freedom in Lockdown

Rev Alan Combes

Call to Worship – Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

StF 303 – I know that my Redeemer lives

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| 1) I know that my Redeemer lives-
What joy the blest assurance gives!
He lives, he lives, who once was dead;
He lives, my everlasting Head.
He lives, my everlasting Head. | 3) He lives, and grants me daily breath;
He lives, and I shall conquer death;
He lives, my mansion to prepare;
He lives, to lead me safely there.
He lives, to lead me safely there. |
| 2) He lives, to bless me with his love;
He lives, to plead for me above;
He lives, my hungry soul to feed;
He lives, to help in time of need.
He lives, to help in time of need. | 4) He lives, all glory to his name;
He lives, my Saviour, still the same;
What joy the blest assurance gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives!
I know that my Redeemer lives! |

Samuel Medley CCL No. 515642

Prayer of Praise

God of creation, Source of all being, the heavens declare your glory and the earth is your handiwork. For the diverse beauty of all you have made; we offer you our praise.

God of salvation, Eternal Word, you came amongst your people, and made yourself vulnerable entering into the risky business of human living; we offer you our praise.

God of life, Holy Spirit, you move in the church and in the world, calling the least and the lost into a deeper fellowship of love; we offer you our praise.

God of all grace, accept our praise, and help us to live as your people in the world. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Let us confess our sins, trusting in God's mercy and forgiveness.

For those times when we have lost sight of your love, despairing for ourselves and the world

Heal us, God, and grant us a new beginning.

For those times when we have lost perspective, putting our own concerns before the needs of your world.

Heal us, God, and grant us a new beginning.

For those times when we have taken for granted the gifts that you have given to us.

Heal us, God, and grant us a new beginning.

For those times when we have chosen to ignore injustice, and neglected those in need.

Heal us, God, and grant us a new beginning.

God has heard our confession, loves us still and, through Christ, offers healing and a new beginning.

Hear then, Christ's gracious words: "Your sins are forgiven." Amen. Thanks be to God.

Loving God, you built your church, the body of Christ, as living stones. As we come to you today, help us to remember that we are your church in every place. Unite us in your Son, and send us out in the power of your Spirit, to witness in your world. **Amen**

Reading: Genesis 9:12-17 – God’s rainbow covenant

And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth.’ So God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and all life on the earth.’

Thanksgiving

In the midst of the current crisis it may seem hard but it is always good to come to God with Thanksgiving. Especially because God is ever faithful. In v16 God says: ‘when I see the rainbow in the heavens, I will remember the covenant I have made with you.’ In these weeks of lockdown we have been fortunate that we do not have to look as high as the heavens to see that rainbow before us. It has been in the windows of houses, on bus stops and school walls or even chalked on the pavement. I am sure there will have been times when we have wondered if God has forgotten us and so maybe it's no bad thing to have a reminder of that rainbow covenant low to the ground where we can see it, even if our head is down. Take a moment to express a word of thanksgiving to God.

Lament

Meanwhile, we have been locked up and locked out of our churches, of fellowship, of care and friendship. Locked out of schools and clubs and shops. We have seen refugees fleeing violence, people in unsafe homes and economies in crisis. Covid 19 has been much more than an inconvenience. People have died, families have grieved apart, children without the benefits of technology have fallen behind. Older people have been even more isolated. And many communities have been forced to live hand to mouth. To name these things is to tell the truth in God’s presence about the hopes we had which are lost. To lament breaks the temptation to be victims, it recognises that our stories of harm and loss are part of God’s story. That God, in Christ knows what it means to be isolated and vulnerable. And so our lament allows our hearts to break alongside God’s heart. So I invite you to quietly take a moment to bring something you have lost in lockdown, your lost hopes, your laments to God.

Marking Loss – a litany of lament

We thought we knew how the world was meant to be. Day followed night, every week had a Sunday and that was the day for church. **How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?**

We thought we knew how the world was meant to be. We made our plans, held our meetings, kept the roof on the church and the show on the road. **How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?**

We thought we knew how the world was meant to be. We would see colleagues, friends and loved ones again, and we would embrace, laugh and share stories as we always have.

How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

And now, we know something new. We know that the world is not ours to control, and that our plans are confounded by the smallest microbe. **God is teaching us a new song, for a new land.**

And now, we know something new. We know that church is not committees, agendas and buildings, it is us, in homes, streets, hospitals throughout the world. **God is teaching us a new song, for a new land.**

And now, we know something new. We only have today with those we love, today is the day to say, ‘I love you’, to mend an argument, to hold on tight. **God is teaching us a new song, for a new land.**

[Silence]

In the face of so much loss, we turn to you, Loving God, praying for comfort and strength. We hold before you the precious losses that we have named today. Be with us in the days ahead, as we try to make sense of a new way of living. **Amen**

StF 644 – When our confidence is shaken

- 1) When our confidence is shaken
In beliefs we thought secure;
When the spirit in its sickness
Seeks but cannot find a cure:
God is active in the tensions
Of a faith not yet mature.
- 2) Solar systems, void of meaning,
Freeze the spirit into stone;
Always our researches lead us
To the ultimate Unknown:
Faith must die, or come full circle
To its source in God alone.
- 3) In the discipline of praying,
When it's hardest to believe;
In the drudgery of caring,
When it's not enough to grieve:
Faith, maturing, learns acceptance
Of the insights we receive.
- 4) God is love; and he redeems us
In the Christ we crucify:
This is God's eternal answer
To the world's eternal why;
May we in this faith maturing
Be content to live and die!

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Reading: Acts 16:25-34 – Paul and Silas released from prison

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose. The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.' Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptised. The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household.

Reading: John 20:19-29 – Jesus appears to his disciples

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.' Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord!' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.' A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you!' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.' Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!' Then Jesus told him, 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'

Sermon – Freedom in lockdown

I am a glass half full kind of person. And a few weeks ago, whilst on holiday I began to excitedly plan for a return to worship. I imagined this would be a time of great rejoicing and release after so many months of lockdown. I picked the great new Testament story of Paul and Silas, when the doors were opened and the chains fell off - mighty, liberating God acting in the world. Their lockdown ended they were set free!

I realise now that I was a little naive and not long after returning from holiday new restrictions were announced in many parts of the country as a second spike of Covid emerged and many experienced a loss of freedom again! I thought about stepping back and abandoning these readings and then, by God's grace, I perhaps began to see what God wanted me to see...

I wonder, did you notice what happened when Paul and Silas were set free? We read from verse 26: 'suddenly there was an earthquake, immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. v28 but Paul shouted in a loud voice do not harm yourself for we are all here.' They were set free, but they stayed where they were. They stayed in captivity! In lockdown! Why?

St Paul's Christian journey had led him to a new understanding of freedom. He knew that God's freedom is different from ours. That God's freedom did not require him to be physically free. And in this particular case Paul also knew that his freedom had consequences v27 'when the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped.' Paul and Silas chose to stay, and by staying the jailer and his household were saved. Scripture tells us they heard the good news of Jesus, believed and were baptised without delay. If we look at Paul's life we can see that he was in fact constantly in and out of lockdown. Indeed after this passage he was released and then arrested again, a number of times. And yet he did not allow this physical lockdown to prevent his continued ministry.

We may yearn to return to what we consider as 'normal' but that doesn't really exist anymore. There is no going back. And in truth Paul's life reflects our life. We are all in and out of lockdown in one way or another throughout our lives. At different times we may find ourselves bound to pride, envy, money, power, loss, self-image or the temptation of sin - all of which can control our lives. And there is only one person who can release us from this lockdown and enable us to find purpose and that is Jesus Christ.

One day whilst on holiday I saw a bird high-up sitting on a Telegraph wire. It was a windy day and as the wire swung back and forth I could see the bird clinging more tightly to its unstable perch. The wire swung more and more and at the very moment when it seemed like disaster would strike, when the bird was most buffeted and at risk, it suddenly spread its wings and flew.

Sisters and brothers, we are seemingly trapped in a long Covid interim period where we cannot control its length or direction. But Christ, who appears to us as he appeared to the disciples locked in the upper room, offers us a new understanding of freedom. At the very worst moment he offers us a chance to let go and to fly... Jesus offers us the opportunity to find freedom within lockdown. Jesus offers us the confidence of Paul and Silas who found salvation's purpose whilst remaining in lockdown. In our lockdown Christ bring us his presence, faith in the face of doubt and his peace. With Christ as our guide - we can and we will endure, we can be free and we will find purpose. I wonder if we can be faithful enough to let go, to spread our wings and to fly... Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Gracious God, for all creation, we pray, remembering places degraded by human selfishness. Forests disappeared, rivers dried up, planes flooded and rising sea levels.

L: God of grace **R: Hear our prayer**

For all in authority, we pray, remembering those who bear the heavy weight of responsibility. We think of those whose decisions affect many lives, in our villages, towns and cities, in our counties and in our countries. We pray that they may have wisdom, strength and humility.

L: God of grace **R: Hear our prayer**

For all your church, we pray, remembering the body of Christ throughout the world. As we give thanks that we are free to worship here today, we remember those who cannot gather, among them those who live with ongoing restrictions and those who know the danger of persecution. We know that many churches

will struggle to continue, following these months of closure and we pray for wisdom and discernment as we work out how to be your church in the future.

L: God of grace **R: Hear our prayer**

For all in need, and for all who grieve we pray, remembering those who are ill in homes and in hospital and those not able to mourn as they would wish. We hold before you all who have died and we give thanks for the NHS, for all health and social care professionals, cleaners and caterers and so many others who help to bring healing and comfort. We give thanks for volunteers and all who serve their neighbours, offering care. We pray that those who give their time and skill to serve others might be protected and be given your peace and strength.

L: God of grace **R: Hear our prayer**

Creator God, source of all life, we give thanks for the story of your love, strengthen us for service and accept our praise. **Amen**

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 405 – Great is the darkness

1) Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain.
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in Your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies.

2) May now Your church rise with power and
love,
This glorious gospel proclaim,
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in Your name.
Help us bring light to this world,
That we might speed Your return.

Ch) *Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit we pray.
Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord Jesus,
Pour out Your Spirit on us today.*

3) Great celebrations on that final day,
When out of the heavens You come.
Darkness will vanish, all sorrows will end,
And rulers will bow at Your throne.
Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet.

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Closing Prayer/Blessing

The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you/us and remain with you/us always. **Amen**

Go into the world to walk in God's light, to rejoice in God's love and to reflect God's glory. **Amen.**

This service draws prayers and ideas from the Methodist Church Service Beyond Exile: A service to celebrate a return to public worship. With particular thanks to Revd Dr Jennifer Smith.