

23rd May 2021 – Morning Service

Pentecost

Rev Chris Watson & Rev Rachel Parkinson

Call to Worship

Come, Holy Spirit, blow among us as we celebrate your calling us out to be the people of God: Birth day of the Church. Come, Holy Spirit, rain upon us as we celebrate your showering of gifts on the people of God: empowering the Church. Come, Holy Spirit, shine between us as we celebrate your awakening us to the vision of all people on earth as the Church of God.

StF 1 – All people that on earth do dwell

- 1) All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice:
Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;
Come ye before him and rejoice.
- 2) The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
Without our aid he did us make:
We are his folk, he doth us feed;
And for his sheep he doth us take.
- 3) O enter then his gates with praise;
Approach with joy his courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless his name always,
For it is seemly so to do.
- 4) For why, the Lord Our God is good;
His mercy is for ever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.
- 5) To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
The God whom heaven and earth adore,
From earth and from the angel host
Be praise and glory evermore.

William Kethe CCL No. 515642

Prayers

How will we speak the name beyond all names?

We will light a flame to proclaim God is among us.

How will we praise the one who knew the cold embers of death for us?

We look into the consuming flame and say 'behold the Lamb of God'

How will we celebrate the Mystery, the Spirit, the Companion amongst us?

We will clap the hands of our hearts, for it is she who makes each one a home for Christ.

God of fire, we shrink from your justice but adore the love which fuels it.

Christ, blaze of God's fire spent upon our darkness, we are stilled and silenced by your passion and death.

Dancing Spirit – flame, you awaken us to the risen Christ, you invite us to sing and dance in our heart; and for this we open the most secret places of our being in adoration and wonder.

God of flame and colour, your life has flowed through our history, leaping from one generation to another, releasing captives, affirming the poor, welcoming outcasts. You have spoken with the accent of all people in displaying your love for all life.

We confess to you and each other our drabness and uniformity, our desire to control rather than share your life; To reproduce the past rather than explore the future;

We confess the narrowness of our vision, and our choosing of the most comfortable path.

God of flame and colour, dance around us, enchant us, quicken us and above all forgive us for painting your gospel in the dowdy colours of our limiting culture. Release us from the prisons of our own making.

In the name of Christ we pray. Amen

Reading: John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

StF 372 – Come down, O love divine

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| 1) Come down, O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing. | 3) Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be,
And lowliness become mine inner clothing,
True lowliness of heart,
Which takes the humbler part,
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps
with loathing. |
| 2) O let it freely burn,
Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes, in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming. | 4) And so the yearning strong,
With which the soul will long,
Shall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace,
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes his dwelling. |

Bianca Da Siena translated by Richard Frederick Littledale CCL No. 515642

Sermon

This week I discovered a new poem. Here it is:

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

I found this poem had something to offer me, though it's not a specifically Christian poem. In fact it has a pretty universal appeal. The idea of a continuous thread; acting as a safety measure; ensuring you can get safely home; crops up in a number of settings.

Perhaps the oldest of these comes from Greek Mythology. Theseus was a Prince of Athens. Having lost in battle, 14 young Athenians were doomed to cross the sea to Crete every year where they were sent into a labyrinth. The Labyrinth was so difficult to navigate that it was impossible to escape and so once you had entered, you were bound to be eaten by the Minotaur monster which lived inside. Theseus was helped by the princess Ariadne who gave him a spool of red thread which he trailed into the labyrinth. With the confidence of knowing where he was, he kills the minotaur and follows the thread back out to safety.

Then there's the story of Hansel and Gretel. During a time of famine their woodcutter father under the influence of their stepmother takes the children into the forest where he hopes they will be taken in and fed. The children leave a trail of white stones and in the moonlight, they are able to find their way back home. Their downfall comes when the next trail they lay is made of breadcrumbs which the birds gobble up.

A third example comes from the book of Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Speaking to the people being taken off to exile in Babylon the prophet Jeremiah says set up road markers for yourself, make yourself guideposts, and note well the road by which you travel so that you can make the journey home.

In all of these three examples, as in the poem, the context is of people journeying into a confusing and threatening place - Babylon, a dark forest, a labyrinth. The danger is of becoming lost, or losing yourself, and of not being able to find your way home. The thread is the thing you hold onto to remember where you've come from; to remind you who you are; and to reassure you that there is a way through the confusion back to a place called home.

So I wonder, in the context of the pandemic, what have been these threads for you? What has given you a sense of continuity, and reassurance, and acted to remind you who you are even when so many of the props of normal life have been taken away?

For me the first thread that comes to mind is the thread of friendship with my group of running friends and the regular routine of our Sunday morning runs. Every Sunday morning at 8 o'clock, come rain, shine and - sometimes this winter - even snow! - we have met to run 5 or 6 miles. Most of the time we've been able to meet as a group of 6. During the strictest lockdowns we have paired up. The friendship, routine, exercise and time out in the open air have been a saving grace for me these past months.

One of the things I've been most proud of in the District is to see how hard churches and Circuits have worked to provide threads for members of the church family and community to hold onto. I get back from my run in time to join one of the many online services around the District but beyond that, so much effort has gone into keeping people in touch through phone calls and printed orders of service in the hope that no-one is left disconnected. Some churches have even said that they feel more connected now than they did before the pandemic! And I've seen how important these connecting threads have been when, in a line from the poem, "tragedies happen, people get hurt or die". Even though physical gatherings have been impossible, church families have still be there for one another.

But beyond church, the poem got me wondering about the threads we hold onto that run through the stories of our faith. One of the stories I've been most helped by during lockdown is the Old Testament stories of Exile....that time when many of God's people were forcibly taken off to live in Babylon. At home in and around Jerusalem, the Temple had been the focus of the practice of their religion. Now, in a distant land and with the Temple destroyed, they had to find new ways of being a people of faith, whilst still hoping that they would - sometime soon - be able to follow Jeremiah's waymarkers back home, where they would rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. This was a very hard time for God's people but it was also a time when their understanding of God developed in leaps and bounds.

But as Christians, what about the thread Jesus offers us to hold onto. We know from the Gospel of John that this thread finds its origin from the beginning of the world....In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The thread of the promise of the Messiah is sewn through the Old Testament though it's as if the stitches are on the underside of the work, barely visible on the surface. But then in Bethlehem the thread of Jesus comes up to the surface of the story, scarlet with the blood of childbirth. We can trace the thread from Nazareth to Jerusalem where it becomes the red thread of Christ's passion. Perhaps here we might think of Jesus in the light of the story of Theseus. He is going ahead of us into the labyrinth, facing the minotaur which is suffering and death, a labyrinth every human must enter. He is laying down a thread so that we might follow in his footsteps without fear of being lost. On the Cross Jesus faces the Minotaur of death. His empty tomb proves he is the victor and death has been vanquished. So what next?

In all the other stories, the thread is then followed back home - Theseus retraces his steps through the labyrinth; Hansel and Gretel follows the white stones to their front door; the Exiles follow the waymarks back to Jerusalem to rebuild what has been lost. But the thread Jesus lays down doesn't go backwards. It goes forward.....through the experience of death and loss to a renewal of life; to resurrection. Jesus goes ahead of us to the Father's house where he prepares a place for us. And we know the way because he is the way and the truth and life. He has laid down the thread from life through death to resurrected life. While we hold on to it, we can't get lost.

I think this applies not only to the final physical death that comes at the end of every human life but also the many little deaths we suffer along the way. Whilst the pandemic has brought final death to many, all of us have suffered little deaths in these past 14 months.....the death of hopes, expectations, certainties, relationships, routines. For many Methodist around the Connexion the temporary closure of their spiritual home will now become permanent with all the loss that entails. But as we draw to the end of lockdown restrictions, Jesus calls us not backwards but forwards.

Imagine the disciples, after Jesus' ascension, gathered together in the upper room in Jerusalem, watching and waiting for the baptism of the Holy Spirit that Jesus had promised them. No doubt they wondered when they could return to pick up Jesus' work just in the places and in the ways and with the people he had ministered to. They expected the work to continue around Jerusalem, and in Galilee. Instead, from the word go, the Holy Spirit drives them forwards not backwards. They find themselves preaching to every nation under heaven. With the missionary journeys of Paul and his companions, the Jesus movement is no longer confined to Palestine but rapidly spreads across the Roman Empire.

We need courage now to follow the thread of Jesus supported by the Spirit's power. Don't expect it to lead you backwards to your old life, but forwards to a renewed life. While you hold onto it you can't get lost. And remember what the poet says: People will wonder about what you are pursuing and you have to explain about the thread - about Jesus. It will be hard for them to see, but don't give up. For there are many who are feeling lost, who need a thread to follow.

StF 397 – The Spirit lives to set us free

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| 1) The Spirit lives to set us free,
Walk, walk in the light.
He binds us all in unity,
Walk, walk in the light. | 4) We know His death was not the end,
Walk, walk in the light,
He gave His Spirit to be our friend.
Walk, walk in the light. |
| <i>Ch) Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light,
Walk in the light of the Lord.</i> | 5) By Jesus' love our wounds are healed,
Walk, walk in the light,
The Father's kindness is revealed.
Walk walk in the light. |
| 2) Jesus promised life to all,
Walk, walk in the light.
The dead were wakened by His call.
Walk, walk in the light. | 6) The Spirit lives in you and me,
Walk, walk in the light,
His light will shine for all to see.
Walk, walk in the light. |
| 3) He died in pain on Calvary,
Walk, walk in the light,
To save the lost like you and me.
Walk walk in the light. | |

Prayer of Intercession

Let us pray for the life and witness of the Church, for the world into which God calls us to share the gifts of his Spirit, for our families, friends and neighbours, and for all who need to know the strength and power of the Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, help us to know your power and love today. May we be filled with your Holy Spirit to witness to your love in our daily lives.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

We give you thanks, Lord Jesus, for your promise not to leave us, but to send us another comforter – the Spirit of truth. May we, rejoicing in your Spirit, have courage to share the Gospel with those around us.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Holy Spirit, give your strength and comfort to all who are suffering in our world today, through war, violence, homelessness, illness or fear. May they know the comfort and joy of your presence always with them.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

Eternal God, grant us the grace to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit in love and joy and peace.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer**

In a moment of silence we bring our own needs before Almighty God..... *[Silence]*

In the power of the Holy Spirit, let us join our prayers with the whole family of God, saying.....

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 398 – There's a spirit in the air

- 1) There's a spirit in the air,
Telling Christians everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
- 2) Lose your shyness, find your tongue;
Tell the world what God has done:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today.
- 3) When believers break the bread,
When a hungry child is fed,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
- 4) Still his Spirit leads the fight,
Seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today.
- 5) When a stranger's not alone,
Where the homeless find a home,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
- 6) May his Spirit fill our praise,
Guide our thoughts and change our ways:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today.

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Blessing

May your heart be kind, generous and expansive like the heavens, may your mind be full of vitality and generosity like the earth, and may your tongue be baptised with new words and metaphors that are sweet, tasteful, fresh and unpredictable like streams of running water. And may we, delighting in the movement of God's Spirit, live by the abundance of God's grace, finding joy and confidence together. **Amen**