

Poole Bay Methodist Circuit worship
Sunday 3rd March 2024 – Lent 3

“The Message *is* the Cross.” - Led by Dr Julian Tawn

This service can be found on my YouTube channel: <https://youtu.be/lvyqKClgV7Y>

Hello, my friends. This is Julian Tawn here again leading worship for Sunday 3rd March, which is the third Sunday of Lent. Whether you are reading this service, or listening to the audio file, or watching on YouTube, you are most welcome.

Today we are considering passages from Exodus 20 and John 2. The Exodus reading concerns God providing the Ten Commandments to the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. In John, we have the account of Jesus overturning the merchants’ tables in the Temple precinct.

So let us now approach our Lord in quietness, clearing our minds of any distraction, so that we can focus on God and listen for His word to us.

Call to worship

Being human, we often forget God,
who gives us in each moment the breath of life;
who holds our wondrous universe in being,
and loves it, and all of us as a part of it.
Let us worship our God,
and learn to live a more godly life.

A gathering prayer

Amazing God, you are our God,
and we are your people, your children.
Help us to learn your ways,
that we may love you more dearly,
and learn to live more truly,
enjoying and sharing your abundant life
with the whole planet.

Amen.

We are now going to read or sing our first hymn “Be still and know that I am God”, which is number **18** in Singing the Faith. As we sing, let us empty our minds of all distractions and focus on God, listening for what He has to say to us today. A recording of this song can be found at: https://youtu.be/AyDr9-Mpc_s

1. Be still and know that I am God. (x3)
2. I am the Lord who saves and heals. (x3)
3. In you, O Lord, I put my trust. (x3)

Let us pray:

A prayer of approach

Holy God, we come to worship you,
to be in your presence in this moment of our lives.
We come not to worship a place or a thing.
We come to worship you, our living, loving, ever-present God.
You are our God, you have given us breath and life and meaning.
Holy God, we come to worship you. **Amen.**

A prayer of adoration

Almighty God, the God of Abraham, of the prophets,
of the disciples, of the apostles and of us:
you are not distant from us but as close as the air we breathe.
You are within us and among us and around us and beyond our comprehension.
You are unchanging and yet forever new, and we adore you.
We are amazed at all you are, and have been and promise always to be.
We bow down and worship you. **Amen.**

A prayer of confession

O Lord our God, we confess our failings and our shortcomings. We
confess our fickleness and our fragility of faith. We make ourselves
other gods and images, we take your name in vain, we do not
keep a time set aside for you, we have lost so much respect for
our elders, abuse people’s honesty and live with falsehoods all
around us. O Lord our God, maker of heaven and earth, forgive us
we pray, renew and refresh us and set us on a right path.

You hear us, Lord God, you yearn for our confession,
for us to see the error of our ways and you offer us your words of assurance,
that our sins are forgiven, our slates wiped clean, our lives renewed.

Amen.

Eternal God, we give you thanks that through the years,
through the generations, through the changing seasons,
you have been with humanity in the good, the bad and the ugly times.
We give you thanks that your truth is
unchanging, steadfast and reliable, upholding and supportive.
We give you thanks that you are there for us in all aspects of our lives
from the moment of our birth
to the drawing of our last breath and beyond.
We give you thanks that even when we seek things
and possessions more than we ought, that still you stand beside us,
walk with us, breathe with us, live within us.

We give you thanks that you are the framework,
the scaffold of our lives.

To you be all praise and glory.

Amen.

As we come to our Scripture readings and reflections, let us sing or read our next hymn by Charles Wesley, “Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire”, which is number **155** in Singing the Faith. The tune on the audio and video is Richmond. If you prefer St Columba, here’s a link: <https://youtu.be/PIG9GwOFu-A>

Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
Let us Thine influence prove:
Source of the old prophetic fire,
Fountain of life and love.

Come, Holy Ghost, for moved by Thee
The prophets wrote and spoke;
Unlock the truth, Thyself the key,
Unseal the sacred book.

Expand Thy wings, celestial Dove,
Brood o'er our nature's night;
On our disordered spirits move,
And let there now be light.

God, through Himself, we then shall know
If Thou within us shine,
And sound with all Thy saints below,
The depths of love divine.

The first reading for this morning is taken from Exodus 20:1-17:

The Ten Commandments

And God spoke all these words:

² *‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

³ *‘You shall have no other gods before^[a] me.*

⁴ *‘You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

⁷ *‘You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

⁸ ‘Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

¹² ‘Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

¹³ ‘You shall not murder.

¹⁴ ‘You shall not commit adultery.

¹⁵ ‘You shall not steal.

¹⁶ ‘You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

¹⁷ ‘You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.’

The Gospel reading is from John, chapter 2, verses 13-22:

Jesus clears the temple courts

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. ¹⁴ In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. ¹⁵ So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. ¹⁶ To those who sold doves he said, ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’ ¹⁷ His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me.’^[b]

¹⁸ The Jews then responded to him, ‘What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?’

¹⁹ Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.’

²⁰ They replied, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?’ ²¹ But the temple he had spoken of was his body. ²² After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.^[c] ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. ²⁵ He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

Reflection

One of the television programmes I enjoy from time to time is an American series about the Naval Criminal Investigation Service, imaginatively called NCIS. The series follows the cases investigated by a team of Federal Agents led by Special Agent Gibbs. A feature of this series is a set of unwritten rules that Gibbs expects his agents to follow, without ever telling them the list! Examples include:

1. Never let suspects sit together.
2. Always wear gloves at a crime scene.
8. Never take anything for granted.
15. Always work as a team.
18. It's better to seek forgiveness than ask permission.
23. Never mess with a marine's coffee if you want to live.
39. There's no such thing as a coincidence.
45. Clean up your own mess.
51. Sometimes you are wrong.

Some of Gibbs' rules are general rules for life, and others are specific for the work they undertake.

The truth is, we all live by rules. There are rules in the organisations in which we work. There are rules in the clubs to which we belong. We have rules in our homes. The rules of the road are there to make driving safe for everyone, and we get annoyed when we see people flouting the rules. This can even result in road rage. One way or another, rules are essential for life, and these are instilled in us at an early age.

Primary school teachers will use a variety of ways to discourage bad behaviour and reward good behaviour in their pupils. One way I heard about recently is a Rainbow Chart. Each child has a pin in the chart. You start in green. If you are well-behaved, your pin will be moved up into yellow, orange and eventually red. Bad behaviour results in the pin moving down into blue, indigo or, God forbid, violet! Lenient teachers will give the child a warning before moving their pin downwards, but stricter teachers will just move the pin without warning!

When the Israelites are delivered from their captivity in Egypt and they make their way, with God's mighty help, through the waters of the Red Sea, Moses goes up Mt. Sinai to meet with the Lord. When Moses comes down, he doesn't have a rainbow chart and pins. He has ten very powerful, life-giving words that will eventually get engraved in stone. And all the Hebrews learn that this is what is expected of them.

Every aspect of Hebrew culture and faith will come to be built on these ten words of life, which came to be known as the Ten Commandments. These are the basics, given right here at the beginning of their life together. And God hopes the message gets across: that they are God's chosen people. That they are freed from slavery and have been given freedom because God is a God of freedom and hears the cries of those who are oppressed.

These ten words are laid out in a brilliant fashion. They're not just willy-nilly list of “dos” and “don'ts”, which is what I thought when I was a lad. They all flow very logically and lovingly from each other, starting from the very first one, which doesn't even begin as a commandment, but as a statement of grace: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” It's right there at the front of it all: before Israel is asked to do anything, God reminds them of all God has already done, and whose they are. And then the rest of them flow from there: ones that focus on the relationship between God and God's people and then to the ones that focus more on the relationships between God's people.

That’s all well and good, but the problem is the message doesn’t really get across. Over time, God’s people begin to see them as nothing more than a list of rules. Rather than viewing them as they are intended, as a gracious gift that describes and defines the life of a free people, the people of God start seeing them as some authoritarian blackboard name-writing system.

That is a nutshell history of God’s people. God sends prophet after prophet in order to call the people back to covenant faithfulness, back to the life God intends for them, but prophet after prophet essentially gets ignored. Some of those prophets end up getting downright angry.

They pronounce all kinds of hellfire and brimstone in order to get that message across. Eventually the people of Israel build a Temple in Jerusalem in order to put in one place their worship and their devotion to God. While that seems to help somewhat, it isn’t too long before the same problems start to creep in again. God’s words of life and the wonderful relationship of grace that they are meant to form between God and God’s people get used and abused by human sin. When people come inside to worship God and encounter the holy, they end up encountering this entire system of religion that’s been set up revolving around the rules of sacrifice.

And it becomes manipulative across the board. The religious leaders use the words of life and the system of sacrifices to manipulate the people. The people use the system of religion to try to manipulate God. People feel like God is manipulating them. And it’s hard to get past the feeling that faith – this initial trust in a God who has saved us and desires life for us – is nothing but a phony rainbow and pin system. It looks like the message of God’s love isn’t ever going to get across.

Then along comes this new ‘prophet’ who comes up to the Temple during the big Passover festival and finds all those manipulative systems of religion and sacrifice. There are tables selling animals for sacrifice, along with booths where you can exchange your Roman coins for currency that Jewish scribes and Temple leaders would accept. The man gets angry. In a very vivid scene of chaos, he makes a whip out of cords, he starts overturning the tables and driving out the merchants.

But if we’re listening, we notice that this scene in the Temple isn’t just about another message that someone’s trying to get across. It’s not a message about overturning a system of manipulative religion. The message is Jesus, Himself. Jesus doesn’t just come, like all the prophets before Him, bearing the message of God’s forgiveness of sin. Jesus becomes the forgiveness of sin, Himself. Hence the confusion about the Temple’s destruction and rebuilding. He’s not talking about the stone Temple. He’s talking about His own body. What we learn from Jesus, you see, is that God’s message is not going to get across until God’s message gets a *cross*. Because of the presence of human sin, which is the tendency to think we can control where we ultimately fall on God’s big rainbow chart of God’s love, the law, the commandments, the gestures of forgiveness, none of it has been getting across. So, in Jesus, the message gets a *cross*. All of the things that stand in the way of a direct relationship with God, all those systems and rules and guilt and shame die forever on the cross of Jesus.

It is something that never really seems to make sense: that God would go to this length to redeem this relationship with us, that he would let his own Son become both the rules *and* the consequences for us. As the apostle Paul puts it, *“for the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.”* For the message about the cross makes absolutely no sense at all to those who are still trying and trying to keep their name off God’s blackboard. But for those who are aware they will always end up transgressing, the cross is salvation. It’s the teacher taking a giant eraser to the chalkboard and saying, “I love you anyway.”

One thing, then, we should often think about is, “What message are we giving across here, in our little temple of the Lord, in our ministries in Jesus’ name?” Do we give off the impression that we’re all about a system of rules? Do we come across as people driven by some sense of game-playing religion, or as those who know that the cross of Jesus claims us as God’s children forever, regardless of our brokenness?

A story is told of a congregation in the USA which was embarking on a big renovation of its worship space. At the beginning of the process an architect was invited in to help the Building Team re-imagine the sanctuary. As he stepped into the church, he immediately focused on the large cross above the altar, suspended against the wall. “That,” he said, matter-of-factly, “has to go. No one wants that to be the main thing you see as you enter here. The design is bad.”

His comment caused an immediate stir among the group. Was he correct? What message does a cross communicate about a community, especially if it’s the first thing someone sees? Those comments immediately became a chance for reflection. The committee talked about their own faith and understanding of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It had stood there for years and years, but it was an offhand comment by an outsider that enabled them to see the life it gave. Ultimately, they decided that the cross was good design.

Now the actual cross in that building is only an object. The true message is the one written in the life of those who gather beneath it each week. The true design is lived in the compassion and mutual understanding that God works in His people. The true force of the cross is known when people live forgiven and free because they know their God has claimed them forever. It’s the life the Ten Commandments were intended to foster and flourish and the message God is always trying to get across.

Yes, the most important statement will not be made by architecture, or a set of tablets, and definitely not by a system of rules, but one reflected in our faith in a God who gives Himself. When we’re at our church best, brothers and sisters, is when we’ve realised that the message we’re trying to get across *is* the cross.

It doesn’t make any sense to the world. It’s the foolishness of God. Our names have been erased from God’s blackboard and written in His book of life. Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

Before we come to our prayers of intercession, let us sing, or read, our next hymn which asks God to guide His Church, that is His people, through all ages to bring God’s Kingdom to earth. It is “Thy hand, O God has guided” which is number **692** in Singing the Faith. For those able to access the internet, here is a YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/eniRq02fMPQ>

Thy hand, O God, has guided
 Thy flock from age to age;
 The wondrous tale is written,
 Full clear, on every page;
 Our fathers owned Thy goodness,
 And we their deeds record;
 And both of this bear witness,
 "One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

Thy heralds brought glad tidings,
To greatest, as to least;
They bade men rise, and hasten
To share the great King's feast;
And this was all their teaching,
In every deed and word,
To all alike proclaiming,
"One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

When shadows thick were falling,
And all seemed sunk in night,
Thou, Lord, didst send Thy servants,
Thy chosen sons of light.
On them and on Thy people
Thy plenteous grace was poured,
And this was still their message:
"One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

Through many a day of darkness,
Through many a scene of strife,
The faithful few fought bravely,
To guard the nation's life,
Their Gospel of redemption,
Sin pardoned, man restored,
Was all in this enfolded,
"One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

And we, shall we be faithless?
Shall hearts fail, hands hang down?
Shall we evade the conflict,
And cast away our crown?
Not so: in God's deep counsels
Some better thing is stored:
We will maintain, unflinching,
"One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

Thy mercy will not fail us,
Nor leave Thy work undone;
With Thy right hand to help us,
The victory shall be won;
And then, by men and angels,
Thy Name shall be adored,
And this shall be their anthem,
"One Church, one Faith, one Lord."

Prayers of intercession

Lord of the universe,
we pray for our world broken by persecution, warfare and strife.
We commend to you the people of Gaza and Israel,
the people of the Ukraine and Russia, the people of the Yemen.

You desire harmony within and between nations;
you yearn for everyone to know security and safety.

Lord of the world and the church:
bring healing and peace.

Lord of the poor and the rich,
we pray for those who live and labour in developing countries
paid less than the amount they need to survive.
We commend to your tender love those who are exploited,
children who are paid pennies, those who work in sweatshops.

You desire justice for all people;
you yearn for all people to be treated fairly and equitably.

Lord of the world and the church:
bring healing and peace.

Lord of the doctor and the patient,
We commend to you those who are suffering from illness;
the healthcare professionals who care for them;
those who are frightened and stressed out by waiting for a diagnosis.

You desire wholeness and health for all people;
you yearn for an end to the pandemic.

Lord of the world and the church:
bring healing and peace.

Lord of the chapel and the cathedral,
we pray for all places of worship throughout the world.
We commend to you caretakers and cleaners, treasurers and guides.

You desire holiness in your children
and in the places in which they worship.

Lord of the world and the church:
bring healing and peace.

Lord of all in need,
we bring to you the prayers of our hearts.
We commend to you those about whom we are especially concerned,
praying for..*silence*

You desire that your children care for one another.

Lord of the world and the church:

bring healing and peace.

In Jesus’ name we pray.

Amen.

We now say together the prayer which the Lord taught His disciples:

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, forever and ever. **Amen.**

It is now time for our last hymn/song which is “The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord”.

This can be found in Singing the Faith number **690**. Here’s the link for those with internet access:

<https://youtu.be/9rIS166ppoE>

The Church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word:
From heaven He came and sought her to be His holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her, and for her life He died.

Elect from every nation, yet one o’er all the earth;
Her charter of salvation, one Lord, one faith, one birth;
One holy Name she blesses, partakes one holy food,
And to one hope she presses, with every grace endued.

Mid toil and tribulation, and tumult of her war,
She waits the consummation of peace for evermore;
Till, with the vision glorious, her longing eyes are blest,
And the great Church victorious shall be the Church at rest.

Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in One,
And mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won:
O happy ones and holy! Lord, give us grace that we,
Like them, the meek and lowly, in love may dwell with Thee.

So, as we reach the conclusion to our time of worship together, I hope and pray that you have heard God talking with you and strengthening you for the week ahead.

A sending out prayer

Loving God, thank you for your gift of freedom.
Thank you also for giving us guidance
on how to be fully alive and loving.
Be with us as we put your guidance into practice,
and help us to enjoy sharing your beautiful world.

Amen.

Well as I say, “Goodbye”, I pray that you will keep well in the weeks ahead.

God bless.

Julian Tawn

25th February 2024