

WORSHIP AT HOME – 5TH SEPTEMBER 2021

Dear Friends,

So on we go into September – the start of the Methodist year when all the meetings start up again! May this year be less restrictive than the last, though I have no doubt that whatever happens we shall cope for we have the love of God to guide us and strengthen us. This week we think about what it means to be a community. We all have different views and we don't always agree, but by listening to one another, trying to find agreement, and accepting each other when we can't, we will discover the presence of Jesus in our midst.

With every blessing. *Margaret*

Call to worship:

'Listen carefully to the ear of your heart.'

These are the opening words of the rule of St Benedict.

God of all individuals and all communities – of all giving and receiving – grant us the stillness of spirit to give attention to you, and the generosity of heart to give attention to our neighbours.

Gracious God, we give thanks for all the ways your Son draws us together in community. We pray for those who are unable to worship alongside those they love – for churches in turmoil – and for all places where relationships are breaking. And we ask your blessing on ourselves, on one another and on all who call upon you in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

The words to 'Soldiers of Christ, arise' written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788] Singing the Faith 637

1 Soldiers of Christ, arise, and put your armour on,
strong in the strength which God supplies through his eternal Son:
strong in the Lord of hosts, and in his mighty power,
who in the strength of Jesus trusts is more than conqueror.

2 Stand then in his great might, with all his strength endued;
but take, to arm you for the fight, the panoply of God;
that, having all things done, and all your conflicts passed,
you may o'ercome through Christ alone and stand complete at last.

3 Leave no unguarded place, no weakness of the soul;
take every virtue, every grace, and fortify the whole;
indissolubly joined, to battle all proceed;
but arm yourselves with all the mind that was in Christ, your Head.

4 From strength to strength go on, wrestle, and fight, and pray,
tread all the powers of darkness down, and win the well-fought day;
still let the Spirit cry in all his soldiers, come!
Till Christ the Lord descend from high and take the conquerors home.

Prayers:

Almighty God,

Maker of the world and everything that is, we thank you for the beauty of creation – for our lives – and for all the blessings that you pour on us.

Eternal God,

You are present in every moment – alive in everything you have made. We thank you for our humanness, for ingenuity and creativity – for the skill of our minds and hands.

In Jesus,

You met us eye to eye and hand to hand. Teach us to care for each other without need of recognition or reward.

In Christ

You blessed the joy of friendship – the power of community. We thank you now for the gift of each other – for families, friends and neighbours, and for the life of your Church throughout the world.

Lord,

You are the Spirit who moved upon the waters and who moves in us now. We thank you for the power of your Spirit who binds us together as one family – and who moves us to acts of love and kindness. You are the source of all goodness – the spring from which all love pours.

Loving Lord,

We thank you, we praise you and we offer you all that we are. **Amen.**

We ask your forgiveness, loving God, for those times when we have been stubborn in our refusal to hear the counsel of others; for the times when we have not given others due time to work through their grievances; for the times when we would like to oust those with whom we don't agree.

Forgive us and bless us with your grace, generosity and openness – in Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

Help us, loving God, to entrust to you our words and our silence – to praise you for prayers answered, and to trust you when nothing seems to change. Bless us with discipline to pray alone – and bless us also with companions with whom we can pray, to your glory and the furtherance of your kingdom. **Amen.**

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.

Ezekiel 3: 7-11. [Living Bible paraphrased]:

'I am sending you to the people of Israel, and they won't listen to you any more than they listened to me! For the whole lot of them are hard, impudent and stubborn. But see, I have made you hard and stubborn too – as tough as they are. I have made your forehead as hard as rock. So don't be afraid of them, or fear their sullen, angry looks, even though they are such rebels.

Then he added: 'Son of dust, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first, listen to them carefully for yourself. Then, afterward, go to your people in exile, and, whether or not they will listen, tell them: This is what the Lord says!'

Romans 13: 8-14:

Pay all your debts except the debt of your love for others – never finish paying that! For, if you love them, you will be obeying all of God's laws, fulfilling all his requirements. If you love your neighbour as much as you love yourself you will not want to harm or cheat him or kill him or steal from him. And you won't sin with his wife or want what is his or do anything else the Ten Commandments say is wrong. All ten are wrapped up in this one, to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Love does no wrong to anyone. That is why it fully satisfies all of God's requirements. It is the only law you need.

Another reason for right living is that you know how late it is – time is running out. Wake up, for the coming of the Lord is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is far gone, the day of his return will soon be here. So quit the evil deeds of darkness and put on the armour of right living, as we who live in the daylight should! Be decent and true in everything you do so that all can approve your behaviour. Don't

spend your time in wild parties and getting drunk, or in adultery and lust, or fighting or jealousy. But ask the Lord Jesus Christ to help you to live as you should, and never make plans to enjoy evil..

The words to ‘Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart’ written by Graham Kendrick and Steve Thompson [copyright 1993 Make Way Music.] Mission Praise 936

*Teach me to dance to the beat of your heart,
teach me to move in the power of Your Spirit,
teach me to walk in the light of Your presence,
teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.
Teach me to love with Your heart of compassion,
teach me to trust in the word of Your promise,
teach me to hope in the day of Your coming,
teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.*

1 You wrote the rhythm of life, created Heaven and Earth;
In you is joy without measure.
So like a child in Your sight, I dance to see Your delight
for I was made for Your pleasure, pleasure.
Teach me to dance.....

2 Let all my movements express a heart that loves to say ‘yes’,
a will that leaps to obey You.
Let all my energy blaze to see the joy in Your face,
let my whole being praise You, praise You.
Teach me to dance.....

Matthew 18: 15-20:

Jesus was talking to his disciples:

‘If a brother sins against you, go to him privately and confront him with his fault. If he listens and confesses it, you have won back a brother. But if not, then take one or two others with you and go back to him again, proving everything you say by these witnesses. If he still refuses to listen, then take your case to the church, and if the church’s verdict favours you, but he won’t accept it, then the church should excommunicate him. And I tell you this – whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, and whatever you free on earth will be freed in heaven.

I also tell you this – if two of you agree down here on earth concerning anything that you ask for, my father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three are gathered together because they are mine, I will be right there among them.’

Meditation of Matthew. [Nick Fawcett].

He said he’d be there, however small our numbers, present among us if we met in his name.

And he *was* at first, when, as we huddled behind locked doors, he appeared among us – risen, victorious, alive!

It was wonderful, breathtaking – all the more so, given that he’d been dead and buried, for we honestly thought we’d said goodbye.

Suddenly he was with us again, our friend Jesus, and we assumed it would stay like that for ever.

Only it wasn’t to be, for once more he was taken away – transported before our very eyes – and when we next met together, gathered for prayer and worship – we waited to see him in vain.

He’ll come, I said, give him time – but days turned to weeks..... weeks to months..... and he didn’t.

Or at least so we thought, but of course we were wrong, for as we broke bread and shared wine, he was there.

As we read from the Scriptures, he was there.

As we ministered to others in word and deed, he was there – his Spirit with us in all we did, and I've come to understand what I should have grasped before: that those words of his weren't just promising *he'd* be there for us – *that* could be taken as read – but asking whether *we'd* be there for *him!*

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Risen Lord, teach us that, though you are enthroned on high, you are also close by our sides; though you are far off you are also near; though you have left us in the flesh you are with us in the Spirit.

Help us to recognise your presence through worship and reflection – to glimpse your glory in the world around us – to hear your call in the cry of the needy – and, above all, to meet and greet you in the fellowship of your people, celebrating the truth that where two or three are gathered in your name, you are there indeed amongst them – just as you promised to be. **Amen.**

Comment:

Sometimes when we think back to those days when Jesus was with his disciples, it is easy to think that all must have been sweetness and honey! But, from this Gospel passage, it would seem that even then this was not so. Always, it seems, there has never been a perfect, harmonious Christian community but that guidelines have always been needed – not that that means much notice is taken of them!

Here Jesus lays out the procedure to follow when individual Christians fall out with one another.

It starts with the private word, moves on to a small meeting and ends up with one being estranged from the community. While in this passage all is told from the point of view of the one in the right, nevertheless at every stage the other point of view is also to be heard.

Imagine that there is a problem and that you appear to be the offender. When your fellow Christian comes to complain about your behaviour, how do you react?

Quite possibly you genuinely don't see their point of view and are convinced you are innocent. What happens, though, when they come back with others who agree that you are in the wrong? Do you pause, think again, try to change – or do you say that of course their friends would agree with them and go off and find a few who will take your side? So it escalates to division and cliques forming in the church.

We come to the second stage. Suppose you are really convinced that someone is in the wrong, you've had a quiet word with them but they won't admit it. You go off and tell a few others who aren't directly concerned with the problem but who go along with you to confront the person. Probably you have thought they would be on your side – what if they seem rather half-hearted to you – what if they see the other person might not have meant things the way you see them – what if they suggest a compromise? Do you still insist on total surrender at the risk of splitting the church or will you agree to compromise even though you aren't convinced that is right?

What if it escalates to the third stage? What if you have been proved right at every turn and it is clear that your fellow Christian is in the wrong and is unwilling to change his/her stance?

Well, you are now entitled to treat them, as one translation puts it, 'like a Gentile and a tax-gatherer' – in other words exclude them from the community.

That seems very harsh to us but the words can't be accidental. Yet throughout the gospel Jesus' constant care of just these groups has been detailed.

Well, instead of turning your back on this ex-Christian, now you are expected to use all your evangelistic powers to bring them back in. You have to show the love and the care that Jesus showed to 'Gentiles and tax-gatherers'. Don't ever feel smug about being right – just get on with the work we are called to do.

We can't always be united – though we could probably manage it more often than we do. There are times when we must hold out for what think is truth against falsehood. Against the temptation to squabble we

have the vision of what unity can do. 'If two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven' we are told. And Jesus adds, 'I'll be there too.'

Jane Williams in her 'Lectionary Reflections' writes: "There is terrible sarcasm in that phrase – 'if even two of you could agree about anything'. What we forfeit by our love of discord!"

Prayers:

We pray for those living in places where brothers and sisters are not reconciled, where violence speaks out and the voice of peace is not heard.

We pray for families who cannot listen to one another's pain, where bitterness speaks out and the voice of understanding goes unheard.

We pray for those communities where diversity is not celebrated, where prejudice speaks out and the voice of tolerance is not heard.

We pray for Christians who cannot agree – where doctrine excludes, and the voice of generosity is not heard.

We pray for one another, that we might speak out with the voice of truth and listen with ears of humility.

We pray in the precious and holy name of Jesus. **Amen.**

The words of 'Father God, I wonder' written by Ian Smale [b. 1949] Singing the Faith 72

Father God, I wonder how I managed to exist
without the knowledge of your parenthood or your loving care.
But now I am your child I am accepted in your family,
and I can never be alone 'cause Father God you're there beside me.

I will sing your praises, I will sing your praises,
I will sing your praises for evermore
I will sing your praise, I will sing your praises.
I will sing your praises for evermore.

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

From Psalm 119: 33-43:

Just tell me what to do and I will do it, Lord. As long as I live I will wholeheartedly obey.

Make me walk along the right paths for I know how delightful they really are.

Help me to prefer obedience to making money!

Turn me away from wanting any other plan than yours.

Revive my heart toward you.

Reassure me that your promises are for me, for I trust and revere you.

How I dread being mocked for obeying your laws, for your laws are right and good.

I long to obey them!

Therefore in fairness renew my life, for this was your promise, Lord, to save me!

Now spare me by your kindness and your love.

Then I will have an answer for those who taunt me, for I trust your promises.

And may the blessing of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – be with us and all we love now and for evermore. **Amen.**