

WORSHIP AT HOME – 16TH AUGUST 2020 – LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND

Call to worship: Lord God, as we come before you now we open our hearts to you. help us to see that we can learn so much from others, even from those with whom we think we may not have much in common. Make us willing to stand out from the crowd, to hear your voice and to act on what we hear.

As we focus totally on you, help us to be brave enough, like Peter, to ask the questions that we would like to ask, and open enough to listen and to hear your answer. Speak to us, Lord, for we are listening. Amen

The words of a wonderful and much-loved hymn – ‘And can it be’ written by Charles Wesley [1707-1788] Singing the Faith 345

1 And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain? For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

2 ‘Tis mystery all, the immortal dies! Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries to sound the depths of love divine.
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore, let angel minds enquire no more.

3 He left his Father’s throne above – so free, so infinite his grace –
emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam’s helpless race.
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free; for, O my God, it found out me!

4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
thine eye diffused a quickening ray – I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.
My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

5 No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head, and clothed in righteousness divine,
bold I approach the eternal throne, and claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Prayer: Living Lord, we praise you that you are a God who loves. You have given us a marvellous world to live in and to share with all your people. You, O God, love everyone equally, and we thank you that we are each unique. We thank you also, that each one of us has so much to give – and to receive – from one another. Thank you for each new experience that you give us. Help us to be open to them and to learn from them day by day.

We know that you love everyone equally, Lord, and that all people are precious to you. We don’t find that easy to do – we have those we love, those we like – and there are those we might find rather more challenging. We are sorry that we fail to follow your way. Help us to hold everyone in our hearts Lord, however we may find some difficult – and help us to find everyone precious to us as they are to you. In your holy name we pray: **Amen.**

The prayer which our Lord taught his followers and friends to say – a prayer said down through the generations and which sustains us today:

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**.

The reading today comes in two parts, and is taken from the Living Bible paraphrased.

First reading: Matthew 15: 10-20

Jesus called to the crowds and said: 'Listen to what I say and try to understand. You are not made unholy by eating non-kosher food! It is what you *say* and *think* that makes you unclean.'

Then the disciples came and told him: 'You offended the Pharisees by that remark.'

Jesus replied: 'Every plant not planted by my Father shall be rooted up, so ignore them. They are blind guides leading the blind, and both will fall into a ditch.'

Then Peter asked Jesus to explain what he meant when he said that people are not defiled by non-kosher food.

'Don't you understand?', Jesus asked him. 'Don't you see that everything you eat passes through the digestive tract and out again? But evil words come from an evil heart, and defile the man who says them. For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, lying and slander. These are what defile; but there is no spiritual defilement from eating without first going through the ritual of ceremonial handwashing!'

Comment: It's hard, sometimes, reading the Gospels, not to feel sorry for the Pharisees, for though they frequently came into conflict with Jesus, they were undoubtedly sincere. In terms of their faithfulness in worship, their zeal in prayer and their strictness in the observance of the commandments and their devotion in studying the Scriptures they were second to none. Their outrage at the words and deeds of Jesus was misguided but it was real. They weren't putting it on or using it as some kind of smokescreen for them to hide behind from the challenges his message brought. They would have been genuinely shocked at what they saw as his disregard for the law – and with his open association with people their law considered unclean.

The problem was, of course, that they had become fixated on the letter of the law rather than the spirit – and with their interpretation of the law rather than the real meaning.

No doubt with the best of intentions at the beginning they had set themselves up as being judges of God's will and by doing that they rejected anything which didn't conform to what they believed.

Do we ever make the same mistake? Do we reject out of hand anything which doesn't conform with what we believe?

Words of a Pharisee after hearing what Jesus had had to say. [written by Nick Fawcett]

He was having a go again, and we were incensed – disgusted – for he was undermining not just us but the law and the prophets – the very fabric of our faith.

Take away our commandments, our rituals refined over the years, and where will we be then, I ask you? Like everyone else, that's where: no different from the common herd and as unclean and unworthy as any. So what was he thinking of, contradicting our customs like that – rewriting our rules, as if he could see into the heart and judge between good and bad, right and wrong?

Instead of questioning what came out of *our* mouth he should have looked to his own, for his teaching was madness, heresy – leaving even his own disciples concerned. Yet if *they* could see where his words were leading apparently *he* couldn't for later, when a Canaanite woman turned up seeking his help, he applauded her faith, as though a Gentile – a heathen, could teach *us* of God; as though all it takes to earn his favour is to express trust and admit need!

He can't mean that, of course, for it would open the door to all and sundry – to anyone and everyone becoming his people – and surely not even Jesus would go that far.....would he?

Teach us, Lord, that it was not just those in centuries past who presumed they could neatly package your will into laws and commands. Teach us that it isn't simply others who make the mistake of thinking that the essentials of faith can be reduced to rules and regulations.

Help us to see that, in our own way, we all do it, attempting to fit you into neat categories that say more about us than you.

Open our minds to wider horizons – to viewpoints which are different to our own – through which you are able to speak, challenge and guide.

Above all, open our hearts to *you* and to the many ways you choose to work for us and through us, far exceeding our expectation or imagining. **Amen**

**The words to 'Lord, you call us to your service' written by Marjorie Dobson [b. 1940] StF 664
[We often sing this to the tune 'Angel Voices'.]**

1 Lord, you call us to your service, each in our own way.
Some to caring, loving, healing; some to preach, or pray;
some to work with quiet learning, truth discerning, day by day.

2 Life for us is always changing in the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions to the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us, as you need us, anywhere.

3 Seeing life from your perspective makes your challenge plain,
as your heart is grieving over those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion, you may fashion hope again.

4 Lord, we set our human limits on the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit, pour your power through,
That we may be free in living and in giving all for you.

Our second reading is Matthew 15: 21-28, again taken from the Living Bible paraphrased.

Jesus then left that part of the country and walked the fifty miles to Tyre and Sidon.

A woman from Canaan who was living there came to him, pleading, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, King David's Son! For my daughter has a demon within her, and it torments her constantly.'

But Jesus gave her no reply – not even a word. Then his disciples urged him to send her away. 'Tell her to get going,' they said, 'for she is bothering us with all her begging.'

Then he said to the woman, 'I was sent to help the Jews – the lost sheep of Israel – not the Gentiles.'

But she came and worshipped him and pled again: 'Sir, help me!'

'It doesn't seem right to take bread from the children and throw it to the dogs.' He said.

'Yes, it is!' she replied, 'for even the puppies beneath the table are permitted to eat the crumbs that fall.'

'Woman,' Jesus told her, 'your faith is large, and your request is granted.' And her daughter was healed right then.

Comment: Many people dislike this passage because they find the way Jesus is portrayed as shocking – he seems grumpy and unpleasant. There is no getting away from the fact that he likens the woman to a dog that only gets the scraps. He does use the lighter word for puppies, or a pet, but even so it is still treating her discourteously.

Some people would like to airbrush this out – but hard sayings in the New Testament make the likelihood of authenticity even greater – why else would the early Church have left it there since it unsettles the picture of a ‘nice’ Jesus.

This woman, like so many people then and now, recognises that she does not fully belong – yet even a scrap is better than nothing. She knows that even dogs find a place within the household.

It seems that there was something deep inside her rising up which not only named her needs but which fired her with persistence. She was determined to get answers – to make her point understood. She may have been an outsider – a non-Jew -but she wasn’t going to be silenced. She wasn’t going anywhere until she got through – she wanted a sign of the future.

Her witty replies seemed to delight Jesus. Although he was then teaching the Jews, it was because he had to start somewhere, but he is truly for all people at all times and in all places. He rejoiced in the faith this woman showed and he showed the universality of the love of God as revealed in him.

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we look as if we are listening to others. We may even make the right noises! But we confess that our attention is often anywhere but where it is supposed to be.

Sometimes we are too distracted by our own concerns, caring only for ourselves and listen only to those who say what we want to hear.

Sometimes we don’t listen to people because we don’t like them, or because they are different from us. Sometimes we have unhelpful thoughts.

And sometimes we don’t listen to you, Lord, because we are too busy – or perhaps a bit frightened of what you might say to us.

Forgive us, Lord, for all the missed opportunities and help us to listen with all our heart and soul. Amen

Lord, the Canaanite woman sought your help. She loved her daughter so much, she was so desperately in need, that she wouldn’t give up till she had her answer. **We pray in faith. Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.**

Lord, may we learn from this woman to wait on you expectantly, patiently, persistently, doggedly. Grant us the courage of our convictions when we truly believe we are doing your will. **We pray in faith. Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.**

We pray today for those who feel excluded, whatever their situation: we pray for prisoners, refugees, the homeless; we pray for the sick, for those who are mentally unstable. We pray for anyone who feels themselves to be an outsider. **We pray in faith. Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord.**

We pray for ourselves when our faith is weak, or we feel that we don’t belong.

We pray in faith. Hear us and answer our cry, blessed Lord for it is in your name we pray. Amen

Lord, the Pharisees were offended by your words. You could have been offended by the Canaanite woman’s words. I ask that, as I go about my business, I will take the time to consider each person I meet as unique – special to you, and worthy of my listening ear.

May I not be offended just because something is out of my comfort zone. **Amen**

The words to ‘I, the Lord of sea and sky’ written by Daniel L. Schutte [b. 1947] StF 663

1 I, the Lord of sea and sky, I have heard my people cry.
All who dwell in dark and sin my hand will save.
I, who made the stars of night, I will make their darkness bright.
Who will bear my light to them? Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord. Is it I, Lord?
I have heard you calling in the night.
I will go, Lord, if you lead me.
I will hold your people in my heart.

2 I, the Lord of snow and rain, I have borne my people's pain.
I have wept for love of them. They turn away.
I will break their hearts of stone, give them hearts for love alone.
I will speak my word to them. Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord.....

3 I, the Lord of wind and flame, I will tend the poor and lame.
I will set a feast for them. My hand will save.
Finest bread I will provide till their hearts are satisfied.
I will give my life to them. Whom shall I send?
Here I am, Lord.....

Closing Prayer and Blessing:

So now we go, Lord, renewed and strengthened in faith, ready to serve you, and to find you in the people we meet. Let us follow you and our hearts. Lead us, good Lord. **Amen**
And may the blessing of God – our Creator, our Saviour, our Life within – be with us and all whom we meet, today and for evermore. **Amen**