

2022 – 20TH FEBRUARY – WORSHIP AT HOME – EPIPHANY 7

Dear friends, As it appears that we are moving now into a time of little restriction I hope that each of you can continue to act as you feel right for you – and to be understanding of those who feel differently. We each have our own health issues and need to be able to act in the way we feel to be safe and sensible. However that may be for you, I hope that this coming week will see you well and content.

Every blessing, *Margaret*.

Call to worship:

Sovereign God, we come at this time to worship you – to declare your faithfulness – to acknowledge your majesty – and to marvel at your love. Lord of heaven and earth, receive our praise.

We are here to rejoice – to bring our thanks – to express our wonder – and to celebrate your goodness.

We are here to seek mercy – to confess our mistakes – to recognise our weaknesses – and to ask for your pardon. We are here to pray – for ourselves – our world – and for one another.

We come to receive for we are hungry to hear you – thirsting to know you better – longing to be filled.

We come to give – to offer you money – to offer our time and our love in the service of Christ.

We come to listen – to the message of Scripture – to the words of Christ – and to the inner prompting of your Holy Spirit.

We come to speak – to sing your praises – to declare our faith – and to make known the gospel.

Sovereign God – accept this time of worship and help us, through it, to draw ever closer to you.

Open our hearts to the love of Christ – our lives to the movement of your Spirit – our minds to all that you are and all that you continue to do; and so may we worship you – not just in these few moments that we have set aside, but in every moment of our lives, to the glory of your name.

Lord of heaven and earth, receive our praise, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The words to ‘Praise to the Lord, the Almighty’ written by Joachim Neander [1650-1680] and translated by Catherine Winkworth [1827-1878] and Rupert E Davies [1909-1994] Singing the Faith 88

1 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!

O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!

All ye who hear, brothers and sisters, draw near, praise him in glad adoration.

2 Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;

surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:

ponder anew what the Almighty can do, who with his love doth befriend thee.

3 Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,

fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee,

then to thy need he like a mother doth speed, spreading the wings of grace o’er thee.

4 Praise to the Lord, who when darkness of sin is abounding,

who, when the godless to triumph, all virtue confounding,

sheddeth his light, chaseth the horrors of night, saints with his mercy surrounding.

5 Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore him!

All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!

Let the amen sound from his people again, gladly for aye we adore him.

Prayers:

Great and wonderful God, we join today, wherever we are, as part of the great company of your people across history, to sing of your faithfulness – to celebrate your love – to acknowledge your mercy and to marvel at your awesome presence.

We rejoice in all that you are – higher than our highest thoughts – greater than we can ever imagine, sovereign over all – yet making yourself known to us in human form, sharing our humanity, and offering us your life.

We rejoice in the awesomeness of your love – in the fact that, even though we fail you, making time for you only in moments of need and often even using you for our own ends, still you have time for us, seeking us out, day after day.

And we rejoice that you care for us as individuals – each one of us chosen, valued and special in your sight. We thank you that, just as you have watched over us during this past week, so you are with us now and will be always.

We rejoice in the wonder of life, and we thank you for the faculties to appreciate it – for the food and clothing to sustain it – the pleasures and pursuits to enrich it – and the family and friends with whom to share it.

We thank you for one another – for the faith that we share – for the fellowship we enjoy – for the Lord we serve and for the call which unites us.

Great and wonderful God, you have blessed us in more ways than we can ever begin to number. Your goodness is greater than we can ever hope to measure – your love is beyond anything we can even begin to fathom; and yet we know you as a living reality in our hearts, as the one who gives shape and purpose to all of life. So we come to you with grateful hearts in joyful homage, seeking, as best we can, to make our response. Receive our praise, Lord, and accept our worship. **Amen**

A prayer of confession: Father, we confess that however hard we try, we do nurture enmity and hold grudges against people we think of as enemies. But, no matter who started the problem, help us to aim for reconciliation – at least to genuinely attempt to understand, to try to sort things out. We know that life is not always so simple so help us to know what to do and how to respond – we know that sometimes we should turn the other cheek – sometimes we should keep things in check – maybe we should simply turn and walk the other way for our own good. Lord, we confess that the complexities of life confuse us and we can make them worse – please help us to understand what you would have us do.

PAUSE

Lord, no matter what we have done, you forgive us; and no matter what others have done, you forgive them – help us to forgive too. You forgive our enemies even when we don't - and you forgive us even though we don't deserve it.

We thank you, Lord, for your forgiveness – and help us to start again to show your love as we deal with the complexities of life. **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.**

Genesis 45: 1-11 and 15: [New Living Translation]

Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, 'Out, all of you!' So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh's palace. 'I am Joseph!' he said to his brothers. 'Is my father still alive?' But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realise that Joseph was standing there in front of them.

‘Please, come closer,’ he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, ‘I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. But don’t be upset, and don’t be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither ploughing or harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an advisor to Pharaoh – the manager of his entire palace and the governor of Egypt.

Now hurry back to my father and tell him, “This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me master over all the land of Egypt. So come down to me immediately. You can live in the region of Goshen, where you can be near me with all your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own. I will take care of you there, for there are still five years of famine ahead of us. Otherwise you, your household, and all your animals will starve.”

Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him.

Comment:

When we think of the story of Joseph what do we think of? I expect many will think of the shiny glamour of the Rice/ Lloyd Webber musical – *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat*. However, behind the gloss lies a profoundly human story. The boy, Joseph, had been his father’s favourite to such an extent that his older brothers became exceedingly jealous. They felt so strongly that they almost decided to murder him – but when they met a group of traders on their way to Egypt from Gilead and sold Joseph to them for 20 pieces of silver. When the traders reached Egypt they sold Joseph to Potiphar who was captain of the palace guard and Joseph became a slave – separated from his beloved father, Jacob. So it is truly moving when Joseph asks after his father – and his brothers were ashamed of what they had done.

However, Joseph doesn’t want revenge now – he can reach into a deeper vision, one of blessing. Indeed, he had faced some terrible times in Egypt but through it all he has come to see that God has sent him ahead of his family to preserve life – to preserve a remnant of God’s covenanted people on earth and from that will be many survivors.

It might not look like much of a blessing to us, but in the face of famine and death, survival is a blessing for it offers the promise of a new day. Joseph’s actions ensure there will be many generations of people to come. Out of the trauma he suffered, the violence he withstood, new life will arise.

When Joseph’s brothers came in front of this high official, they didn’t recognise their brother, Joseph. He, however, reveals to them who he is, and forgives them for the past. Indeed, he promises to keep them from poverty, if not death from starvation. His brothers had guilty consciences, knowing what they had done to him – and so they found it hard to accept forgiveness – but eventually they were able to speak with him on an even keel.

We learn from this that it can be hard to accept forgiveness, but the world cannot continue without our both giving and receiving forgiveness.

Before this revelation to his brothers, Joseph had tested them hard to ensure that they had changed from the envious, cruel people they had been all those years before. Here he speaks:

Meditation of Joseph:

It couldn’t be, I told myself – not here in Egypt – not my long-lost brothers, surely!

But it was! Believe it or not, there they were, kneeling before me, prostrating themselves in homage.

It was astonishing – heart-rending – and it was all I could do not to break down in tears, such was the poignancy of the moment. Only I couldn’t, not yet – not after all they had put me through.

Can you imagine what it was like, your own brothers plotting to kill you?

And then, sensing a reprieve, only to be sold into slavery – condemned to years of servitude in a strange and distant land. I wasn't blameless, I knew that. God knows, I had given cause enough for resentment with those dreams of mine – even if they were coming true then and there before my eyes.

But though I could understand what they did, and why, I could never excuse it – not a betrayal as vile as that.

So, you see, I had to test them – see if they'd learned their lesson or were still the same. I made them sweat, to put it mildly, their hunted expression as I quizzed them saying it all; and when that cup turned up in Benjamin's sack, you should have seen their faces – it was as though their world had collapsed in pieces. There seemed little doubt after that – their sincerity plain to all. But I had to be sure, so I strung them along further, tormenting, teasing, until the perspiration poured off them and they begged for mercy. It was my father's name which did it – when they spoke of him and all he had suffered. I broke down then, all the pain of those long and lonely years apart flooding out – and, as the truth slowly dawned on them, breaking through their guilt, we held each other close, laughter mingling with tears – old feuds forgotten. Was that the way it had to be – the way God planned it? It's hard to believe – too many questions left unanswered – yet I tell you this, it wasn't just my brothers I found changed that day – it was me as much as any of them, each of us stronger and wiser for all that we had faced.

Suddenly life was sweeter and richer than we had ever imagined, as though, somehow, despite everything we'd faced, it all made sense!

Luke 6: 27-38: Loving your enemies. [The Bible for Everyone]

'But this is my word,' Jesus continued, 'for those of you who are listening; love your enemies! Do good to people who hate you! Bless people who curse you! Pray for people who treat you badly!

If someone hits you on the cheek – offer him the other one! If someone takes away your coat – don't stop him taking your shirt! Give to everyone who asks you, and don't ask for things back when people have taken them.

Whatever you want people to do to you, do that to them. If you love those that love you, what credit is that to you? Think about it: even sinners love people who love them. Or again, if you if you do good only to people who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Sinners do that too. If you lend only to people you expect to get things back from, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to get paid back. No, love your enemies; do good and lend without expecting any return. Your reward will be great! You will be children of the Highest! He is generous, you see, to the stingy and the wicked. You must be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you'll be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you: a good helping, squashed down, shaken in and overflowing – that's what will land in your lap. Yes, the ration you give to others is the ration you will get back for yourself.'

Comment: Jesus continues his teaching after coming down from the mountain, and, like Moses, he wants to lead his people to the freedom of the Promised Land. Such freedom will involve a change in our attitude towards much of life— a change of heart. We are to learn to love and not to hate.

The word used for love is not 'eran' which is passionate love, nor is it 'philien' which is family love. The word chosen is 'agapan' – it is an active benevolence towards each other. It is wanting the best for one another [even those we might find difficult or unappealing] This kind of love is more about our will than our heart, though both are involved.

If we are not to become slaves to hatred, greed, anger or resentment, we will have to have a positive attitude of will towards all people. This means that however others might treat us we should still aim to react in a positive way to them – still go out of our way to be kind and generous.

Jesus sums this up in verse 31 – 'Do to others as you would have them do to you'.

It is actually a hard ask because it is all too easy to become slaves to bad attitude, to bad behaviour. Easy to become consumed by anger and resentment towards people who have treated us poorly. But this can consume us so much, using up our time and energy, that we no longer enjoy the freedom which God gives us.

God is merciful towards us – we have to learn to be merciful to others in our turn – to forgive as we are forgiven. Being critical of others can be so destructive both to the community and to ourselves.

This doesn't mean acting without discretion – it does mean that an act of will seeking the good for the person and to the person. If we can forgive it so often will bring us a new freedom. If we can be generous rather than possessive, we will find that it is by giving that we make more room in our lives to receive all that God has for us.

Let us seek to learn the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Prayers: Almighty God, through Christ you have demonstrated the wonder of your grace – sharing our humanity, living among us and giving freely of yourself. You didn't just speak of love, you showed it in action. Help us to do the same.

Forgive us for so rarely practising what we preach – for failing to show in our lives the faith we profess with our lips, our actions time and again belying our words.

We talk of forgiving one another, yet we nurse grievances – we talk of being content, yet we are full of envy – we talk of serving others, yet we serve self – we talk of loving truth, yet we can deal falsely.

We speak of commitment yet can be careless in discipleship – of faith, but can be full of doubt – of vision, but are narrow in our outlook – of being a new creation, but we are the same as before. Forgive our weakness and assure us again of your forgiveness – inspire us with your love and renew us in your service.

Speak to us now – remind us yet again of the values of your kingdom and that in losing ourselves we find who we really are – in sacrificing that we gain everything – in weakness we discover strength – in sorrow we receive comfort – in dying to self we rise to you and discover life in all its fullness.

Almighty God, may we not simply speak about faith and love but demonstrate both of these through the people we are and through the lives we live. Grant that our words and deeds may be as one and so may we be fitting witnesses to your renewing, redeeming power.

Take what we are, Lord, and make us what we long to be; through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.

The words to 'Lord, your Church on earth' written by Hugh Sherlock [1905-1998] Singing the Faith 410

1 Lord, your Church on earth is seeking your renewal from above;
teach us all the art of speaking with the accents of your love.

We would heed your great commission sending us to every place –
preach, baptise, fulfil my mission, serve with love and share my grace.

2 Freedom give to those in bondage, lift the burdens caused by sin.

Give new hope, new strength, new courage, grant release from fear within:
light for darkness; joy for sorrow; love for hatred; peace for strife.

These and countless blessings follow as the Spirit gives new life.

3 In the streets of every city where the bruised and lonely dwell,
let us show the Saviour's pity, let us of his mercy tell.

In all lands, and with all races let us serve, and seek to bring
all the world to render praises, Christ, to you, Redeemer, King.

Closing Prayer: Lord, thank you that we are loved and forgiven by you. We know it is hard to love those who have hurt us. Give us your strength – help us to love our enemies. Help us to do good to those who hate and hurt us – and help us to know when we have hurt others, and to repent, and to seek only to do good. In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**