

Worship for Sunday 31st January 2021 prepared by Rev'd David Vincent

Song: Stf 628

Faithful one, so unchanging. Ageless one, you're my rock of peace.
Lord of all I depend on you. I call out to You again and again.
You are my rock in times of trouble. You lift me up when I fall down.
All through the storm, your love is the anchor, my hope is in You alone.

Prayer

Space... to pause in stillness. Time... to become more aware.
The fewer the words, the greater the wonder.
The deeper the encounter, the simpler the mystery - human and divine more than intertwined.
Then... gratitude, joy, and transformation. Thanks be to God. Amen.
(Stephen Best, *URC Prayer Handbook 2019 p.51*)

Today's worship theme: *'Signs of Hope'*

I wonder how you react when we're told: *'There's light at the end of the tunnel! We are on the route out!'* Maybe you feel something of a warm glow, but also have doubts that linger in the back of your mind. The daily figures on progress with the Covid 'jabs' certainly give us rising hope - but we're not surprised also to be reminded that *'it's still a long road out'*.

So perhaps now is a good time to look more closely at what lies ahead - to ask what the 'new normal' could be, and how we might play a part in it? Or, as we were asked in our service last Sunday: To what might God be calling us? Perhaps now really is an opportunity to reshape our lives and our society in a healthier, altogether better pattern.

Bible Reading Matthew 5: 43-47

⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends, hate your enemies.' ⁴⁴ But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may become the children of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. ⁴⁶ Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! ⁴⁷ And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!

Reflection *'Signs of Hope'*

In recent months we have seen many heart-warming examples of care for others, for which we thank God, who is the ultimate source of all goodness. We think of the dedicated care given by those who work in our Health Services and Care Homes, often at real danger to themselves. We think of so many community volunteers offering support to those who are isolated or vulnerable. We think of cafés and restaurants who have provided cooked meals to many in need. We think of those who have carried out amazing fund-raising to support other compassionate ventures. All these, and countless others, are signs of God's gracious presence, bringing us both hope and also encouragement to continue in playing our part for 'The Common Good'.

Jesus spoke of this in Matthew 5: 43-47, reminding us that *'God makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike'* - God's uplifting presence enfolds all the world and all of life. God's compassion and care surround not only ourselves, but all of humanity, indeed all of creation. The 'Common Good' lies within God's heart.

Similarly, Jesus' familiar parable of *The Good Samaritan* speaks to us of God's concern reaching out most especially to those who are in need, are vulnerable, or are victims. Just like that Samaritan and Israelite, our 'neighbour' in need may be someone of a different race or a different faith, or might have a very different role in society, or might even be considered an enemy - but even so, God's compassion and care extends to them.

And of course we know how Jesus not only *spoke* about God's gracious loving-kindness - he also *lived* it! He would reach out a hand to anyone, but showed particular concern to those who were neglected by others: the outcast lepers, the hated tax-collectors, the vulnerable widows - to anyone in danger of being left out or left behind, like the '*widows, orphans and foreigners*' of whom the Old Testament repeatedly spoke with compassion.

I wonder if you watched the recent inauguration of President Biden in the United States, and like me were struck by these words in the concluding prayer: *'In God we discover our common humanity, and in our common humanity we will seek out the wounded and bind up their wounds; we will befriend the lonely, the least, the left out; we will seek the good in and for all our neighbours; we will love the unloveable and care for our most vulnerable... lest we miss Kingdom's goal.'*

Here in Britain we also have huge challenges as we emerge from this pandemic. The past year has cost our nation so much in government debts, in lost jobs and in lost loved ones, and as a nation we are going to struggle to get back on our feet. Even with the best policies and best efforts, there will be those who 'fall through the cracks', who will get left out or left behind. Some may have continued physical or mental health difficulties; some may struggle to pay for just basic costs of food and shelter. Yes, even in our own neighbourhoods, communities and towns these real problems may well continue to spread.

But I hear a little voice in my head telling me that: *I'm retired now. It's time for me to settle back a bit, time for the things that I particularly enjoy. And anyway, I am still 'doing my bit'.* But then deep down I know that this is only a half-truth, and not the best way of living - mostly looking after 'No. 1'! And I remember the friendship and joy that comes through making even a little difference for and with other people. I might think of myself as being 'a channel of God's blessing', but then find that actually, it is me who is blessed the most!

So how might we actually make a difference? There are plenty of practical possibilities. Do we have neighbours who might appreciate a 'phone call or an offer of help? Perhaps we could take up some active involvement with a local charity? Could we support in fund-raising, as well as with our prayers? Perhaps you could find out more about an organisation that we as individuals or as a church might support?

For example, Wimborne [Foodbank](#) is now responding to double the number of requests, compared to 2019. Contributions to their bin at our supermarkets is a real help, but they also need extra funding. Our [Community Befriending Scheme](#) is looking for extra volunteers to offer company and a little practical help to vulnerable local residents. [Routes to Roots](#) offers support to homeless people in our area. [All We Can](#) and [Christian Aid](#) both work with poorer countries where the pandemic has been tragically devastating. The [International Care Network](#) offers support and advice to those who arrive at Poole seeking asylum from persecution or oppression. *(See below here for further details of these organisations.)*

Of course these are only some suggestions, among many possibilities. But they are reminders of the opportunities that we might have. We have learned that in stopping the spread of the virus, each of us has a part to play. And now, in shaping what the 'new normal' could be, each of us again can play a part. Open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, as individuals and as a church, we who know the grace of God, will surely find new opportunities as channels of God's compassion and care - opportunities that will be a blessing to us also. *'Our world is troubled. Longing for hope... Christ be our light!'*

Hymn: Stf 706

Longing for light, we wait in darkness. Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people, light for the world to see.

Chorus

Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light! Shine in your church gathered today.

Longing for peace, our world is troubled. Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us. Make us your living voice.

Longing for food, many are hungry. Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others, shared until all are fed.

Longing for shelter, many are homeless. Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others, walls made of living stone.

Many the gifts, many the people, many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another, making your kingdom come.

Prayers

- In the quietness of our hearts, we pray for people we know who have been directly affected by this pandemic, whether through illness, through loss of loved ones or through other disruption to their own circumstances... Lord in your love, Hear our prayer.
- We pray for our national leaders, and the leaders of all nations, with their great responsibilities in guiding us forward through these troubled times... Lord in your love, Hear our prayer.

- We pray for our churches:
Gracious God, we thank you for the various different churches in our own town,
Each with particular insights into the fullness of your Kingdom,
And we pray for each other, as we seek faithfully to worship and serve You.
As we give thanks for our fellowship together, we are also conscious of our failings.
Forgive us, Lord, if at times we have been too quick to criticise or to disagree,
And too slow to listen, to understand, and to build partnership together.
Lead us all deeper into the fellowship of Jesus Christ
So that, together, we may honour and serve you more faithfully
Here in our town and community.

- And we pray for ourselves:
Firstly, acknowledging before God that we do not *'love our neighbours as we love ourselves'*...
We ask for God's forgiveness, and enabling to follow the Way of Jesus.

God our Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer,
May we who know your love, act justly;
May we who know your grace, love mercy;
May we who know your generosity, walk humbly with you.
Inspire us in prayer and strengthen us in action
For the transformation of the world and the glory of your name. Amen.
(Elaine Pyrke, *Methodist Prayer Handbook 2019 p.11*)

Hymn: Stf 713

Show me how to stand for justice
How to work for what is right,
How to challenge false assumptions,
How to walk within the light.
May I learn to share more freely
In a world so full of greed,
Showing your immense compassion
By the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,
Whether given or received
For my need has not diminished
Since the day I first believed.
Let me seek no satisfaction
Boasting of what I have done.
But rejoice that I am pardoned
And accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle
Modelled on your living word,
In humility submitting
To the truth that I have heard;
Make me conscious of your presence
Every day in all I do:
By your Spirit's gracious prompting
May I learn to walk with you.

Blessing

Go out into the world as bringers of love, as makers of peace, as messengers of hope,
Knowing that the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Is with us today, tomorrow and forever. Amen.

Quiet Reflection

You may like to take a few further minutes of quiet 'space' for your own thoughts and prayers, or simply to 'be' with God. It may be helpful to play a favourite piece of gentle music.

For further information

All We Can (Methodist charity): www.allwecan.org.uk

Christian Aid: www.christianaid.org.uk

Community Befriending: 07736 825378 (Wimborne)

<https://adultsocialcare.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/help-living-at-home/good-neighbours-and-preventing-isolation/>

Foodbank (Wimborne): <https://wimbornefoodbank.org.uk/supportus>

Homelessness (Poole): www.routestoroots.org/charity

Refugees (Poole): www.icn.org.uk

US inauguration - closing prayer: www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjc1dHaC-jA