

BASINGSTOKE AND READING METHODIST CHURCH
WORSHIP, 1st AUGUST 2021

Prepared by Peter Frank

Words for a Dying World

Welcome to worship today, as we continue to journey through life with Jesus Christ, who is alive and dwells with us, wherever we are today. Together we enter the presence of God and of each other.

Reading: Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.

God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Come and see what the Lord has done, the desolations he has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire. He says, "**Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.**"

The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Our focus today is on grief, and how the Church can best travel alongside, respond to and help the sorrowful. Remembering always that grief is part of the journey towards resurrection.

Hymn: HP 209; StF 312: The head that once was crowned with thorns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpzoSWoaSso>

The head that once was crowned with thorns
is crowned with glory now;
a royal diadem adorns
the mighty Victor's brow.

The highest place that heaven affords
is his, is his by right,
the King of kings and Lord of lords,
and heaven's eternal Light:

The joy of all who dwell above,
the joy of all below,
to whom he manifests his love,
and grants his name to know.

To them the cross, with all its shame,
with all its grace, is given;
their name an everlasting name,
their joy the joy of heaven.

They suffer with the Lord below,
they reign with him above;
their profit and their joy to know

the mystery of his love.

The cross he bore is life and health,
though shame and death to him;
his people's hope, his people's wealth,
their everlasting theme.

Thomas Kelly

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Glory to you, O God: you raised Jesus from the grave, bringing us victory over death and giving us eternal life.

Glory to you, O Christ: for us and for our salvation you overcame death and opened the gate to everlasting life.

Glory to you Holy Spirit: you lead us into the truth and breathe new life into us.

Triune God, we pause before you in gratitude and love; and as we dwell in your presence, we recall our falling, failing and fear:

When we have fallen into despair, **Lord, forgive us.**

When we have failed to hope in you, **Lord, forgive us.**

When we have been fearful of death, **Lord, forgive us.**

When we have forgotten Christ's victory, **Lord, forgive us.**

May the living God raise us from despair, give us victory over sin and set us free in Christ. Amen.

Grief is of God – 1

Why does a child cry? Why do I get so upset that I feel like crying, as a child might – and sometimes I do – when things do not go my way? There's no simple answer. A baby might cry because of real and present pain – a new tooth coming through, for example – or because she is tired, or uncomfortable, or alarmed at being handled somewhat clumsily by someone who is cheerily saying "Its alright little one, it's only Grandad...".

As we become older we learn to manipulate the feelings of our parents by turning on the tears. Sometimes it works, mostly they see through it. But they can always tell when the tears are genuine and the pain real.

We mature and leave childish ways and tears behind us, most of the time. But still we weep, sometimes over the immediate – the death of a loved one, extreme pain, or despair – and sometimes with a deep sense that something is very wrong with the world and it seems that we can do little to right it. It is this grief that I seek to address today. It is this grief that is of God. Not the tears of immediate pain or the cries of despair, for these are different. But the grief that sees that what God has created as good has been abused and injustice has been caused; be it climate change, political expediency with truth, pandemic, pollution and the loss of natural habitat for our flora and fauna, or hatred because of who or what people are.

It is this grief that motivates the Young Christians Climate Network to walk from the G7 Summit in Carbis Bay last month to COP26, the 26th UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow in November: grief at the global crisis of climate change and the injustice this causes as our poorest neighbours suffer the worst of its consequences.

Sorrow and grief are not negatives. It is true that they are painful, but they are the means for us to process and bring positives out of trauma and disaster. Grief brings about

compassion, companionship and healing action. As we have experienced time and again during the coronavirus pandemic, shared grief has brought deeper love and acts of kindness, and made neighbours from strangers.

Hymn: HP 673; StF 495: Dear Lord and Father of mankind

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1MN3chW1Hk>

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re clothe us in our rightful mind,
in purer lives thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard
beside the Syrian sea
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
our words and works that drown
the tender whisper of thy call,
as noiseless let thy blessing fall
as fell thy manna down.

Drop thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
thy coolness and thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm!

John Greenleaf Whittier

Reading – Luke 19.37-44

Grief is of God – 2

Last week Stephen Appiah painted a vivid picture of Christian discipleship for us, as he portrayed our calling in the face of the historic adversity which is the current Covid-19 pandemic as being to fight on our knees. “It is not enough to rely on the reservoir of faith that we have. We have to fight on our knees and plead with God using every means of grace...” When it comes to the church’s response to grief in the world, I echo Stephen’s call: we have to fight on our knees.

At the start of our short reading from the gospel, Jesus is triumphant – carried along on a donkey, but moreso on the adulation and praise of the crowds. “Blessed is the king who

comes in the name of our Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" But, hidden from view, Jesus' heart is heavy, and as Jerusalem comes into view it is wrenched open, broken for all to see: "O Jerusalem, if you, even you, had known on this day what would bring you peace – but now it is hidden from your eyes... because you didn't recognise the time of God's coming to you." Beloved city, home to God's chosen, but blind to what those people had made it. They thought that they were celebrating the coming of the Messiah who would bring freedom, and indeed they were, but they were woefully misunderstanding the nature of freedom and peace. They thought that it was the Romans that needed sorting out; Jesus saw with the eyes of God that it was the hearts of men and women that lay in bondage, and he grieved at their blindness.

Grief at the way the world is, is known to those who see the world with the eyes of God. We are all created in the image of God, but for some that image has been crushed by worldly ambition, fear or despair, and they no longer see with the eyes of God.

Jesus has come to Jerusalem to do God's work, to see it through to its end, its perfect completion. He knows and understands the imperative, for his grief is sharp. It is deepest when Jesus himself is literally fighting on his knees as he prays in the Garden of Gethsemane... As Luke tells it, "Being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground"; or in Mark's account, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."

The anguish and sorrow of Jesus are wrought by the injustice, human greed and hatred he sees, and just what it means for God's created world, and what it means for him. To replace brokenness with peace, to reconcile the imperfect with God, is his work. To take upon himself the sin of the world in order that the world might again know fulness of life as God created it to be.

Godly grief at how far things are from how God created them to be is a part of the calling of the Church. How do we, the Church, the body of Christ on earth respond? How do we lay down our lives to reconcile the world to God? How do we reach out with the hand of Christ to the oppressed, offer hope and bring light? I offer two contributions, **engagement** and **expression**. For if fighting on our knees before God in prayer prepares and directs our hearts and souls and minds and strength for missional action, then we must stand.

Engagement

Incarnation is God's engagement with the created world. God sees the damage we, human beings, have done to human relationships, to the created order, to our relationship with the plants and animals, and grieves. Jesus comes to us as God incarnate, "incomprehensibly made man", and engages from within in the human condition. Jesus knows what it is to be tempted, angry, hungry, and wronged, and shows us how God would have us respond: with acceptance, with love, with compassion. Without this engagement God stands above and outside, but through the Holy Spirit God stands within the mess we've made.

How do we engage with those things that grieve us. First, we find out about them. We can't all become experts on every injustice in the world, but we can all invest a little time and attention to that which catches our notice and quickens our heartbeat. Many Christians are engaging with climate justice through the Eco-Church process, through supporting Cristian Aid and Tear Fund and other such organisations, through demonstrating their commitment by walking from Carbis Bay to Glasgow this year – and some from our Circuit have this week walked some of that way alongside the Young Christians Climate Network as they journeyed through our area.

Engagement is “being with” others; those who are experiencing hardship and injustice. Understanding what has gone wrong and the impact that is having on people’s lives. “Being with” may be a physical presence, or supporting those who are leaders in fighting injustice on the ground. But engagement is costly. Christ engaged with humankind until it broke his heart, and then he loved us to his death for us. True engagement with those things that matter most is to centre them in our lives, and the grief we encounter is real. We need to prepare on our knees and fight on our knees.

Expression

Make a noise about it! Not, “Look at me, aren’t I great, I donated £10 to Christian Aid!” But let others see and hear what you have perceived as injustice and learned about its causes and impacts. Call out the wrong, not by naming and thereby persecuting individuals but by demanding a change in society. YCCN are expressing their climate grief by walking over 1200 miles so that people may see and hear their call for political commitment.

In our churches we need to give space to telling the stories of those who cannot speak for themselves. We need to bring into our worship the hurt of the world, and put that hurt into words. We hear from time to time that church is not relevant to the modern world. I reject that charge as a generalisation, but in specifics we can on occasions be challenged and one way to make ourselves more relevant is to reflect the reality of the world in what we say and do.

One tool at our disposal is that of lament. Lament allows us to use words to express the ache of our hearts. It gives expression to grief; an outpouring of sorrow, of our sense of complicity in what is wrong, and of our failure and our inadequacy to address it. In lament we open our hearts to God and become vulnerable before God. We are drawn into petition, struggle, solidarity and hope, with a God who is still creating. The prayer of lament brings truth and engagement into the heart of our worship.

By engaging with and expressing grief, we are not making the cause go away or pretending that everything will be alright. We are not simply making a loud noise by raising our voices in anger and criticism whilst standing apart. But from the midst of the pain we are able to bring light, hope and love where it is most needed. For we are the Church, the body of Christ in the world today. We do proclaim that the Kingdom of God is upon us. Simply by being with others we share the compassion of Jesus. In understanding their pain and grieving with them, we bring light and hope. And by voicing our anger and campaigning for justice, we might even bring about greater change for good.

In the name of Jesus.

Amen

Hymn: StF 324: In a byre near Bethlehem

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqjMlr2j3aU>

In a byre near Bethlehem,
passed by many a wandering stranger,
the most precious Word of Life
was heard gurgling in a manger,
for the good of us all.

And He’s here when we call Him

*Bringing health, love, and laughter
To life now and ever after
For the good of us all*

By the Galilean Lake
where the people flocked for teaching,
the most precious Word of Life
fed their mouths as well as preaching,
for the good of us all.

And He's here when we call Him...

Quiet was Gethsemane,
camouflaging priest and soldier;
the most precious Word of Life
took the world's weight on His shoulder,
for the good of us all.

And He's here when we call Him...

On the hill of Calvary –
place to end all hope of living –
the most precious Word of Life
breathed His last and died, forgiving,
for the good of us all.

And He's here when we call Him...

In a garden, just at dawn,
near the grave of human violence,
the most precious Word of Life
cleared His throat and ended silence,
for the good of us all.

And He's here when we call Him...

John Bell and Graham Maule

Prayers of Lament and Intercession

In the power of the resurrection we offer our prayers to God.

O God, open our eyes to see the world the way you see it; with love for what you have created and grief at how we have treated it, broken it, and brought about injustice and pain to many. As we see pictures of another starving child, hear tales of shoals of fish killed by our pollution of the rivers and seas, read about another voice of reason being silenced by wielders of power; as injustice, extinction and hunger are brought to our attention, let us grieve and engage as your Church, your voice and power in the world.

God of love and compassion, we grieve our disinterest, our fear and our blindness to the things that would bring peace. We grieve the nations' waste of natural resources and reluctance for change because of political disinclination and fear of losing wealth and status. We grieve the destruction of the earth with our pollution, and the abuse of created life by our greed. We grieve our tendency to stand against each other in war, and our failure to stand for peace.

Into this disorder you send Jesus. Over this world his kingdom stands supreme. Love and peace are at the heart of Christ's reign, and in him we are reconciled to your purposes for the world. In his name may your Church stand as a beacon for truth, goodness and

justice, and carry your light into the darkest places. Give us eyes to see and courage to act in his name in all things. May our presence bring relief and our message bring hope, and where we must be a cause of division may it not be within the Church but as a line between the good and the wrong in the world and within people's hearts.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Hymn: StF 407: Hear the call of the kingdom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5OdlpJZVs0A>

Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King;
let his song rise within you
as a fragrant offering
of how God rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
all who trust in his unfailing grace

Hear the call of the Kingdom
to be children of light
with the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ;
walking justly before him,
loving all that is right,
that the life of Christ may shine through us.

*King of Heaven, we will answer the call.
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
salvation in Jesus' name.*

Hear the call of the Kingdom
to reach out to the lost
with the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross;
bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come:
let the nations put their trust in him.

King of Heaven...

Keith Getty, Kristin Getty and Stuart Townend

Blessing

Trusting in what is unseen,
believing the best is to come,
in hope the universe waits:
God's purpose shall be revealed.

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May you know the enduring friendship of the Christ who dies for you, the close companionship of the Spirit who dwells with you, and the eternal love of God who holds you close, today and every day.

Amen.