

BASINGSTOKE AND READING METHODIST CIRCUIT
WORSHIP, 18th OCTOBER 2020
KNOWING GOD'S PRESENCE

Prepared by Peter Frank

Welcome

Welcome to worship today. We gather as a scattered community, worshipping at home, perhaps with some of those closest to us, or perhaps alone, but in so doing we enter the presence of God and of each other. Take a moment to remember those people amongst whom, in less extraordinary times, we sit alongside and pray. Reflect on how God brings us together again today, as we share in his love and generosity of grace.

Opening words – Psalm 99.1-4 (from *The Message*):

God rules. On your toes, everybody!
He rules from his angel throne – take notice!
God looms majestic in Zion,
He towers in splendour over all the big names.
Great and terrible your beauty: let everyone praise you!
Holy. Yes, holy.

Let us rejoice today with the whole of creation as we approach God in worship, and as we sing our opening hymn:

Hymn: StF 155/HP 469: Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fehCum04JQ>

*Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
let us thine influence prove;
source of the old prophetic fire,
fountain of life and love.*

*Come, Holy Ghost, for, moved by thee,
thy prophets wrote and spoke:
unlock the truth, thyself the key,
unseal the sacred book.*

*Expand thy wings, celestial Dove,
brood o'er our nature's night;
on our disordered spirits move,
and let there now be light.*

*God, through himself, we then shall know,
if thou within us shine;
and sound, with all thy saints below,
the depths of love divine.*

Charles Wesley

Prayer of Adoration

From the dawn of time, Creator God, you have known, fashioned, loved and given yourself to the universe. You exist beyond our knowledge and experience, outside time and space; without you we cannot start to appreciate you, or our place in your presence. So, while you *transcend* our being and understanding, you *condescend* by becoming present with us. You enter time in the creation of space, sun, moon, earth and seas and all that dwell therein. You enter our existence in Jesus Christ, supremely human, to show us how you create us to live, to be. You enter our worship, our community, and our hearts, in Spirit: with passion, vitality, knowledge and love! Creator God, we worship you, aware that we

hardly know you and have no right to come before you, except by your great love which calls us, welcomes us, and makes us whole. So we come, giving back our lives to you who gave us life; our love to you who is love. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

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.

Reading – Exodus 33.12-23

Moses is not a happy bunny... or at least, not a happy leader, lawgiver and prophet to Israel. To everything God says to reassure him, Moses objects:

“...you have not let me know whom you have sent with me”

“...show me your ways”

“How can it be... unless you go with us?”

We, too, have God's promise that God, in Jesus Christ, will be with us always. We, too, object, demand reassurance, and prevaricate, and let our fears surface and prevent us moving forwards as God calls.

Confession – from Wild Goose Worship Group *A Wee Worship Book*

In you, gracious God,
the widowed find a carer.
the orphaned find a parent,
the fearful find a friend.

In you,
the wounded find a healer,
the penitent find a pardoner,
the burdened find a counsellor.

In you,
the miserly find a beggar,
the despondent find a laughter-maker,
the legalists find a rule-breaker.

In you, Jesus Christ,
we meet our Maker,
and our match.

And if some need to say, 'Help me'
and if some need to say, 'Save me'
and if some need to say, 'Hold me'
and if some need to say, 'Forgive me'
then let these be said now
in confidence
by us.

(Silence)

O Christ,

in whose heart is both welcome and warning,
say to us,
do to us,
reveal to us
the things that will make us whole.

And we will wait;
and we will praise you.
Amen.

Hymn: StF 495/HP 673: Dear Lord and Father of mankind
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rSfk37xsoik>

*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 – Matthew 22.15-22

Showdown!

A showdown is an event, especially a confrontation, that forces an issue to a conclusion.

The encounters in our readings today are confrontations: Jesus with the Pharisees, and Moses with God! Two points from our readings today: firstly, “Render unto God the things that are God’s”, and secondly, “...you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen”.

1. RENDER UNTO GOD...

The Pharisees, we’re told, are seeking to entrap Jesus. They’re upset at his liberal teaching, and fed up with having their status and standing undermined. “So, Rabbi...” – imagine here some ironic tucking at forelocks in mock obeisance – “So, Rabbi, should we pay our taxes to those dastardly Romans or not?” The sub-text here is that the Romans, the occupying power in Judea and Israel at the time, had no right to be there anyway, and no right to the Jews’ hard-earned cash! It was a trick question. In answering either “Yes” or “No”, Jesus could be discredited. “No”, and he’s held a revolutionary, and arrested by the Romans for sedition. “Yes”, and he’s risking his reputation as a religious teacher, for all good Jews know that God is the only king to whom homage should be given. To admit the validity of Roman taxes is a direct insult to God! Jesus is having none of it, and gives his famous retort, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s”.

Render unto, or give to, God, the things that are God’s. This begs the questions:

- What are the things that are God’s that we can give back to God?
- What exactly does it mean to give anything to God?

Because it seems to me that part of our problem is that we fail to recognise those things which are of God, and in our hearts and our thanksgiving, give those things back to God. And those things are everything! Whatever we are, say and do, and whatever we possess. Do we direct our actions, thoughts and words into doing God’s work and showing God’s love in the world? Do we direct our hearts and souls to God in prayer and worship?

In our reading from Exodus we found Moses unsure of himself, uncertain as to the future, and doubtful about how this “Stiff-necked” people he must lead will react to the command to set out on a journey towards the unknown. God reassures Moses: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” But Moses is afraid, and pushes God further. “How will I know this, and how will my people know this, and how will those we encounter on our journey know that we are your people and not to be messed with because you, almighty God, are with us? Show me your glory, I pray.”

The audacity of it! The cheek! You can’t go around asking God for a special audience! Can you? Perhaps it’s just what God wants from us. Is this what “Render unto God...” really means? More passion; more urgency; more recognition that every fibre of our being is of God and without God we are left high and dry flailing through life with no purpose worth the effort. Perhaps Moses’ urgent need of reassurance of God’s presence is a lesson to us all. “God, if you’d really have us move forwards and complete your purposes amongst us in Basingstoke and Reading and the villages and suburbs, then prove yourself to us because the risks look enormous from where we’re standing!”

Are our hearts really in it? Are we prepared to give back to God what God has sown in us? Or will we rest on our survival so far, bothered by fearful uncertainty and buying into the security of the world by paying Caesar to look after us?

The lesson from Moses is that God reveals God’s glory to those whose hearts desire it.

2. YOU SHALL SEE MY BACK

When God yield’s to Moses, the deal is this: you shall not see my face – my glory is more than you can bear – but you shall see my back.

Because God's self-revelation depends on trust. It's as if God's saying, "You cannot see me on the road ahead as you look forwards (my face); but when you look back, you will see and recognise that I was there (my back)."

None of us can experience God as God is in all his wonder, but God may be known by the marks of his passing by. By what has been done, God's goodness is known in our hearts and lives once we have stepped forwards and tried life with God at the centre.

Throughout history, the Jewish people have known God's presence by living the Exodus: by teaching and celebrating the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the gift of the Promised Land, in all generations. So God is known, and God's presence is proved.

To prove that God's presence is with us and God's rest is given, we need to look around at what is and what has been. We recognise the mark of God on events and achievements past by the light shone within by the Holy Spirit: "Come Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire, let us thine influence prove..." The proof we seek is there within us. We miss it when we spend our time and energy seeking certainty in a vague, uncertain and frightening world. But when we focus on the things which are God's, the evidence becomes undeniable. God proves his presence by the Spirit within us.

As we, churches and Circuit together, seek the right way to emerge from lockdown, it is as if we were leaving a place of security in which we have been shut away from the journey ahead, just as Israel when they camped around Sinai. It was a place of comfort and safety. But as God called Israel to move forwards, to continue the journey, so God calls us to move forwards. Shall we, with Moses, have the audacity to call upon God, "Show us your glory"? And to truly give to God what is God's and let go of the cosy memories and ties of our places of comfort? Would we really see God's glory, mindful that it is only fully revealed in moving onwards, in change and uncertainty and steps of faith?

God, through himself, we then shall know,
if thou within us shine;
and sound, with all thy saints below,
the depths of love divine.

Amen

Hymn: We cannot bear the full light of your glory

Suggested tunes: "Morning Star" (StF 226); "Highwood" (StF 720/HP 236). Alternatively, the text may be sung to the tune "Londonderry Air" (StF 350/HP 238) – amending the final line (8) of the tune to repeat line 4.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Wj_RBIh8P0

*We cannot bear the full light of your glory
while we are here on this created earth;
your holiness, your claim on truth and justice,
would crush our lives, lay bare our secret shames.*

*So, in your love, your mercy and true wisdom,
as you come close, you hide us with your hand;
yet let a glimpse of majesty and grandeur
colour our lives, beyond imagining.*

*You do not come as fire or wind or earthquake
but as small voice, a murmur, hardly heard.
When life is hard we may forget your glory
but light spills out, even from darkest clouds.*

So, God, each day, we look to glimpse your glory;

to find you here in ordinary life.

*Then we can sense the fullness that awaits us
when we're embraced by your eternal light.*

Words: © Andrew Brown, March 2014

Prayers of Intercession

O God, from whom to turn is to fall, to whom to be turned is to rise, and in whom to stand is to abide for ever; grant us in all our perplexities your guidance, in all our dangers your protection, and in all our sorrows your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Augustine of Hippo

Almighty God, you are present in all places, town and country, this is your world; help us to be mindful of all you have given us to care for.

Help us to show our discipleship by recycling and reusing whenever we can.

Please God, we want recycling in our own lives: may we experience the renewing grace of your Son and the rejuvenation of your Holy Spirit and may gifts and virtues that have become tired or overlooked be reused.

O God, renew our faith and holiness that we may be refreshed, blessed and transformed into the Christians you want us to be. Amen.

Steven Wild, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly District Chair

Renewing God, may we share in your love for the world by living alongside Jesus, with his compassion, with his presence in the lives of those who need him most, and in his preparedness to give everything for those he loves. May our leaders across the world place the interests of their people before themselves, and work with others to see a just sharing of resources to all people.

Have compassion on those whose lives have been shattered by Covid-19. Comfort those who mourn, and strengthen those who suffer from the illness. Be close to those, including students who are away from home, whose lives are uncertain, insecure, and depleted because of the coronavirus.

And Renewing God, we pray for those we love the most, those whose presence we miss, and those for whom we carry a burden of care.

.....

God of compassion and mercy, listen to our prayer. May what we ask in Jesus Christ your Son be done according to his word, who said,

“Ask, and you will receive,

seek, and you will find,

knock, and the door will be opened to you.”

To you, merciful God, through your Son, in the lifegiving Spirit, be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

Methodist Worship Book

Hymn: StF 498/HP 726: God of all power, and truth, and grace

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWn7r-jx0oc>

*God of all power, and truth, and grace,
which shall from age to age endure,
whose word, when heaven and earth shall pass,
remains and stands for ever sure;*

*That I thy mercy may proclaim,
that all mankind thy truth may see,
hallow thy great and glorious name,
and perfect holiness in me.*

*Thy sanctifying Spirit pour,
to quench my thirst, and make me clean;
now, Father, let the gracious shower
descend, and make me pure from sin.*

*Give me a new, a perfect heart,
from doubt, and fear, and sorrow free;
the mind which was in Christ impart,
and let my spirit cleave to thee.*

*O that I now, from sin released,
thy Word may to the utmost prove,
enter into the promised rest,
the Canaan of Thy perfect love!*

*Now let me gain perfection's height;
now let me into nothing fall!
be less than nothing in thy sight,
and feel that Christ is all in all.*

Charles Wesley

Blessing

May the road rise up to meet you;
may the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again, may God hold you.
Until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.

StF 772; Trad. Irish blessing