

Sunday 18th October 2020

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use whilst we are unable to use Methodist Church premises. If you are well enough why not spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Opening Prayer

To You we rise, in You we rest
We stay at home, we go on quest,
Still You are our abode (from H and P 39, v5
alt.)

Hymn: 608 All Praise to our redeeming Lord
who joins us by His grace
(for an organ version see:
<https://youtu.be/VQQwzluYBaw>

All praise to our redeeming Lord,
who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored,
together seek his face.

He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope
we hand in hand go on.

The gift which he on one bestows,
we all delight to prove;
the grace through every vessel flows,
in purest streams of love.

E'en now we think and speak the same,
and cordially agree;
concentred all, through Jesu's name,
in perfect harmony.

We all partake the joy of one,
the common peace we feel,
a peace to sensual minds unknown,
a joy unspeakable.

And if our fellowship below
in Jesus be so sweet,
what heights of rapture shall we know
when round his throne we meet!

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Prayer of Approach

Heart-stirring God,
You know each of us by name
and day by day we discover your favour afresh.
Your love is new every morning.
Your Presence remains with us,
whether we are called to travel or need to stay
put.
You are our rest-giver and the source of our
peace.

We marvel that you choose to be gracious to
us.
We are touched and humbled by the mercy You
extend.
We ask You to stir our hearts and teach us Your
ways so that we who belong to You may know
more of You.
Show us Your glory.
Open our eyes to it, stretching in beauty over
the face of the earth,
shining in the face of Christ Jesus and smiling in
the faces of every life lighted by Your Spirit,
so that we and all Your people may give You
glory and worship You in Spirit and in Truth.

Amen

(prayer inspired by Exodus 33 vv. 12-23)

Prayer of Confession

(You can begin this prayer with your hands held shut)

Giving and forgiving God, You are rich in mercy and generous to all.

Help us to see clearly the priorities, prejudices and anxieties in our lives.

Help us to face honestly the injustice, greed and exploitation of the society in which we live. Forgive us when our concerns have been limited and we have behaved as if our lives and resources were ours to use as we wished.

Forgive us when we have failed to let Your big-heartedness open our hearts and hands.

(Open your hands)

Merciful God, give us the grace and courage to open our hearts and hands.

Shape our lives and use us for we belong to You.

Amen

Assurance of Forgiveness

Receive the riches of God's mercy and grace.

Know beyond any doubt that You are loved and forgiven in Jesus

Today's Reading from the Old Testament

Exodus 33 vv. 12-23

Today's Epistle Reading

I Thessalonians 1 vv. 1-10

Today's Gospel Reading

Matthew 22 vv. 15-22

Time to Reflect

There have been times in the past months, in those moments between sleeping and waking, where I have 'come to' and then remembered 'yes, we are still here, in the middle of the pandemic'. Like everyone who thought they had 'a settled life', I find myself continually adjusting to new levels of uncertainty, and expectations which have changed so much. Often all we can know is that another day starts and we are still 'here, in the middle' and we do not know how or when this 'new normal' will end.

This is a strangely interim life, fluid and marked by waiting, stuck in what is sometimes described as the 'messy middle'. It may have been like too for the early Christians Paul wrote to at Thessalonica. His letter offers testimony to the extraordinary dynamism of early Christianity. Probably written within twenty years of the Crucifixion it presents a recognisable picture of established church life. But these Christians are keenly conscious that they are living 'in the middle' between God's great act of rescue and their eternal hope. In the midst of persecution and bereavement they may well have felt stretched and disorientated. The Gospel passage gives us the feeling of 'coming in in the middle', as if we had walked into a room in the middle of a conversation or turned on a television or radio in the middle of a drama. Whether it was right to pay taxes to the Romans was a long-running debate on which many took entrenched positions. It is a clever and dangerous 'trick question' because a direct answer lays Jesus open to charges of collaboration or revolution.

Matthew shows us Jesus taking and holding the coin, perhaps turning it over in His hand, studying the image of the Emperor, reading the imperial titles with their grandiose claims. In the hands of Jesus, a new perspective emerges and tense political and ethical question is seen in a new light. The principle is the priority of God, the need to render God what is due. The question of 'what is owed' to Caesar is addressed to the questioners. What new perspectives on entrenched issues and problems might Jesus open for us when we turn them over and put them in His hands?

To those Thessalonians picking their way through the 'messy middle', Paul's words were surely hugely encouraging. He shares how he thanks God for them in his prayers. He observes how their genuine faith and change of priorities was apparent to him and all the churches. When we think about how we support each other as Christians, we often focus on giving kindly advice or practical help. Paul shows us that one of the most affirming

and valuable things we can do is to point out signs of God's presence in their lives. Paul is like a field officer, actively searching for and affirming signs that the Spirit is at work in these new churches. Moses told God that he didn't want to go on another step, didn't want to budge, unless assured of continuing God's presence (Exodus 33 vv. 15-16). With joy Paul discovers such signs of God's Presence bringing renewal and change in the lives of his fellow Christians and it brings him to his knees in thankful joy. May God open our eyes and hearts so we like Paul can start our own scavenger hunt for signs of God's presence and offer words of encouragement and affirmation, and prayers of thanks.

Take a time to sit quietly

Think of Jesus giving attention to a tricky situation where you do not know how to speak or act for the best. Pray that as you put this into Jesus's hands you will receive a renewed perspective.

In the 'messy middle' what would it mean to embark on a scavenger hunt for signs of God's Presence? Give thanks for someone in whose life you see God at work. Is there a way you could encourage them by letting them know?

A time of prayer

Patient God

Help us to remember that we can't find the words, You listen to our hearts and Your Spirit pleads for us in sighs too deep to be spoken.

Lover of Justice, we hold before You the peoples of the world. Establish equity and grant wisdom.

Strong God, we hold before You the church through the world and our own churches. Strengthen hearts and renew vision.

Merciful one, we hold before You those we know in need. Reach out with healing and restoration, encircle in comfort and care.

Listening God, refresh our sense of Your Presence and strengthen and guide us day by day, until with all Your beloved people we see

You face to face in Your Kingdom.

Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father

Hymn: Listen to StF 615 Let Love be real

<https://youtu.be/SkBaxZw5NxU> (Matt Beckingham)

or sing a verse of a hymn that comes to mind

Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go.

*As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands and space to
grow.*

Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us
free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my words are
weakness;
give me your love in spite of all you know.

Let love be real, with no manipulation,
no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams and
disappointments;
give me your trust when all my failings show.
Michael Forster (b. 1946)

A prayer of blessing

May God our Father inspire and strengthen us
in our work of faith

May Christ Jesus our brother motivate and
sustain us in our labour of love

May the Spirit our helper establish and build in
us a steadfast hope.

That our living may be a reason for
thanksgiving and bring Glory to God.
Amen.

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Exodus 33: 12-23

Moses' Intercession

Moses said to the LORD, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' He said, 'My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.' And he said to him, 'If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.'

The LORD said to Moses, 'I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favour in my sight, and I know you by name.' Moses said, 'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The LORD"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' And the LORD continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.'

1 Thessalonians 1: 1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians in God the
Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace to you and peace.

The Thessalonians' Faith and Example

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus

Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Matthew 22:15-22

The Question about Paying Taxes

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, 'Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?' But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' They answered, 'The emperor's.' Then he said to them, 'Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.