

# Worshipping Together

## West Sussex Coast and Downs Circuit

September 2020

Despite lockdown and global pandemic, we have been able to continue to worship God together in a variety of ways.

In September some churches in the circuit will be beginning to transition to physically gathered services. However, the circuit leadership team is also very much aware that some of you do not yet feel ready or safe to attend physically gathered worship. We are also aware that some of you were unable to attend physically gathered worship pre-lockdown but have felt included in new ways through the worshipping opportunities offered over the past months.

We therefore bring **Worshipping Together** as an offering from the circuit to you, which you can use as a worship resource at home, in your garden or your local park, knowing that you will be participating as part of our scattered community who are held together through our belonging to the body of Christ.

These short services have been collated by local preachers, ministers and worship leaders from across the circuit.

If you are well enough, we invite you use this resource each week, at a time to suit you, and spend a few moments with God, knowing that you are **Worshipping Together** with other people who are also sharing in this act of worship with you.

These worship materials are also accessible via the circuit website:

[www.westsussexcoastanddownscircuit.co.uk](http://www.westsussexcoastanddownscircuit.co.uk)

**Circuit Welcome Service (online)**

**6<sup>th</sup> September 2020 at 6:30pm**

**Participate online** via our circuit YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo-lyusGbXMszrVxswo-hNg/live>

or **Participate by telephone** (audio only)

Contact your local church for telephone access details



Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020<sup>1</sup>

**GATHERING**

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*As we come to worship, you may like to have a time of silence and light a candle. Let us remember that wherever we are, God is with us.*

*Today is the first Sunday in the new Methodist year*

### Call to Worship

I love you, O Lord, my strength  
The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;  
My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge.  
He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.  
I call to the Lord who is worthy of praise,  
and I am saved from my enemies.

*Sing, read, pray or proclaim – Thank you, O God<sup>2</sup>*

Thank you, O God, for the time that is now,  
for all the newness your minutes allow,  
make us alert with your presence of mind  
to fears and longings that move humankind.

Thank you, O God, for the time that is past,  
For all the values and thoughts that will last.  
May we all stagnant tradition ignore,  
Leaving behind things that matter no more.

Thank you for hopes of the day that will come,  
for all the change that will happen in time;  
God, for the future our spirits prepare,  
Hallow our doubts and redeem us from fear.

Make us afraid of the thoughts that delay,  
faithful in all the affairs of today;  
keep us, Creator from playing it safe,  
thank you that now is the time of our life!

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<sup>1</sup> Preparation and original material by Sheila Morgan and Daniel Dawkins. Prayers from 'The Word in the World' and 'Prayers for Christian Worship' compiled by Donald Hinton

<sup>2</sup> Thank you, O God by Fred Kaan, Singing the Faith 478

## Prayer of Adoration and Thanks

God of life, of all ages, of all places;

When creation came to be, you held its hand;

*Look around you, listen, smell .....*

*Thank God for everything you see and hear and smell because he has created it.*

God of all life, as we worship you this day;

*Name the members of your family, your friends, colleagues, neighbours.....*

*Thank God for their diversity, your relationship with each one of them.*

*Give thanks for those called to be deacons and ministers in the Methodist Church and especially for those who are, today, starting in a new place.*

God of all life we know we can depend on you;

*Thank God for the times you have known his presence during the last week in times of joy and in times of trouble.*

## Prayer of Confession

God of community, as you lead us through the crowded streets of living,

Where we must learn and change and grow,

We thank you for those who surround us,

Whom we can call sister and brother in Christ.

Thank you for the jumbled family of faith that we know as your Church.

It is the Church of forgiven sinners;

Of those with bruised knees and wounded hearts

Who have been soothed and salved by the ointment of your love.

For this diverse Church we pray:

We pray that we may limp - so that we will always lean on you.

We pray that we may be weak - so that we will always need your guidance.

We pray that we may doubt ourselves - so that we will always trust in you.

In the midst of our living,

We pray that you will guide our steps so that we walk together;

Refusing to march ahead, but humbly waiting for those who lag behind;

Listening, lending an arm and a shoulder, and willing to become the caring,

Sharing, people you want your Church to be. **Amen**

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**Readings:** Matthew 18 vs 15 – 20 & Romans 13 vs 8-14

**Reflection:** How should we behave when we have an issue with a Brother & Sister in Christ's behaviour? There were once two people, let's call them Mabel and John. Both Mabel and John are Christians who go to the same church, Mabel is a new Christian and John is someone in the leadership team. Whilst out at a restaurant, Mabel notices John with another woman that is not his wife, and John is behaving towards this woman as though she is his wife. Well, what should Mabel do? Mabel knows as we do, that as Christians we are called to Holy living. And she knows throughout the bible it is shown that for God it is important that when sin occurs that it is dealt with. It is not to be covered up but dealt with. Finally, she knows it is important as Christians to deal with issues in a way that God would find pleasing.

But while Mabel is happy with concepts as a new Christian, she doesn't know practically what to do. This was left out of her membership classes! She wants some practical guidance as to how she should deal with what she has seen. Should she go over to John and create a scene, does she wait until Sunday and confront John at church, does she tell the Minister and let them deal with the issue? And to be fair how many of us when we see other Christians sin ask ourselves what we should do?

So, we need some practical biblical guidance. And thankfully our readings for today provide us with the guidance. In Matt 18:15 we find ***If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you.***

Firstly, we can see there is no condoning of sinning here. Secondly, it also states that the person that has observed the sinning is to address the issue. This I believe is to nip the sin in the bud and get the person to repent as quickly as possible. Note that the issue is initially to be addressed between the person who sinned and the one who observed the sin. If the matter is dealt with then there is no need for it to be further discussed. I believe this is to make the sin less a matter for public knowledge and thus potential gossip, embarrassing the person and more about sorting the sin.

In v17 we hear that only if they don't listen is the matter then to be widened to be heard by the wider community. But what happens if they refuse to listen to the wider church? We hear that if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Well, this seems a bit interesting and slightly condemnatory. But studying commentaries to try and determine the original meaning, it seems that the meaning is more along the lines of: if the person still will not repent you are (as one commentary writer put it), to send the unrepentant person to Coventry. If that person still refuses to repent you are to then distance yourself from them.

Now let's say Mabel approached John, he refused to listen. She then brought the matter to the leaderships attention and that John was initially still unrepentant. And as a result, he has been asked to resign from the church leadership and the church has been adamant that whilst carrying on in an adulterous relationship he cannot attend worship. This seems to be in line with what verses 15-17 have told us.

And in v18 we have read ***“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”***. So, on the surface this appears to be a seal on the church stating whatever is said on earth will be ratified in heaven. And this verse has historically been used by the church as a means pointing towards its right of judgement.

So with our story, this verse gives a seal of approval to what the church has done to John. That's it all done and dusted for John he is banished for life. ***Or is it?*** Some commentaries say that v18 was initially separate from the other verses in the passage. But it was put in with the other verses as it links with them. ***How?***

The original meanings of the words could link to the fact of sending the unrepentant sinner out but also having the ability to lose the judgement to welcome the sinner back. And it is generally agreed their meaning is more dealing with what is and is not sin rather than condemnation of the sinner. So following on from v17, which seems to issue a casting out of the sinner and that is final, v18 offers hope. If the sinner repents, the judgement can be loosed.

But why is this ability to loose the judgement important? Well, our reading from Romans states in v8: ***Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another***, And in v10 ***Love does no harm to a neighbour***.

So, we are to be ongoing in our love for our neighbour. Any dealings with our neighbour are to be done with a heart of love. This heart of love reflects the heart of God. Now in God's heart is both justice and mercy. And as a result, we can say

God is a God of restorative justice. Always seeking to want to have a relationship with his creations.

So, if John repents then there is hope and the church is to welcome him back. So to conclude **'How should we behave when we have an issue with a Brother & Sister in Christ's behaviour?'**

Firstly, any sin must be dealt with.

Secondly, try and keep the matter between yourself and the people who have sinned.

Thirdly, if the person still refuses you are to then widen the matter to try and get the person to repent.

Fourthly, only if that person still refuses is the church to distance itself from the unrepentant person.

Finally, this is only until the point they repent and at which point we are to open our arms and lovingly welcome them back. Amen.

## RESPONDING

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*Sing, read, pray or proclaim* **Song: Forgive our sins as we forgive<sup>3</sup>**

**'Forgive our sins as we forgive,'  
you taught us, Lord, to pray,  
but you alone can grant us grace  
to live the words we say.**

**In blazing light your cross reveals  
The truth we dimly knew,  
How small the debts are owed to us,  
How great our debt to you!**

**How can your pardon reach and bless  
the unforgiving heart  
that broods on wrongs and will not let  
old bitterness depart?**

**Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,  
and bid resentment cease;  
then, reconciled by God to all,  
our lives will spread your peace.**

### Prayers of Intercession

God our Healer, in sorrow and shame we bring you our brokenness,  
that you may touch, forgive and heal.

We bring you the cracks and chips in our most important relationships: the misunderstandings and hurts we engender between families, friends and lovers. We bring you the fissures and fractures in our worshipping communities: the petty rivalries, our avoidance of real meeting; the intolerance of difference, our wrong priorities.

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<sup>3</sup> Forgive our sins by Rosemond Eleanor Herklots © Oxford University Press, Singing the Faith 423

We bring you the shards and fragments of your wider household:  
nations and cultures at war – or striving for supremacy;  
the earth, exploited for gain, dying for want of our respect.

Where there is no vision, the people break loose.  
Give us, we pray, dreams to bind and inspire us for the future,  
hearts to forgive one another for the past,  
and hands open to one another in the present.

**The Lord's Prayer:** *Our Father .....*

### Sending

God of beginnings and endings,  
take the past with its memories,  
take the present with its activities,  
take the future with its uncertainties,  
and make all three one whole;  
that our lives may be in harmony with your Spirit of peace.

### The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all forever more. Amen





Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September<sup>4</sup>

**GATHERING**

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*As we come to worship, you may like to have a time of silence and light a candle. Let us remember that wherever we are, God is with us.*

Sing, read, pray or proclaim - **Gathering Song: Come on and Celebrate**<sup>5</sup>

Come on and celebrate, his gift of love, we will celebrate,  
The Son of God who loved us, and gave us life.  
We'll shout Your praise, O King, You give us joy nothing else can bring,  
We'll give to You our offering, in celebration praise.

*Come on and celebrate, celebrate, celebrate and sing,  
Celebrate and sing to the King.*

*Come on and celebrate, celebrate, celebrate and sing,  
Celebrate and sing to the King.*

### Prayer

Faithful God. We come looking to Jesus; the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.  
We come to draw the threads of our lives together and find wholeness.  
May your Spirit be with us as it was in Jesus  
Holding all together in harmony:  
The human with the divine; the stillness of being with the energy of doing;  
Speaking with action; death with resurrection.

Faithful God,  
You show your faith in us by making us partners in your work,  
And calling us to continue Christ's mission.  
Be with us now,  
Give us integrity, bring us wholeness, so that our faith will show in quiet action,  
As following the way of Christ, we reach maturity in Him. Amen.

**RECEIVING**

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### Gospel Readings:

**Luke 7:36-50 The jar of perfume incident**

**Luke 5: 17-26 A paralysed man lowered through the roof**

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<sup>4</sup> Preparation and original material by Ian Field

<sup>5</sup> Come on and Celebrate by Patricia Morgan and Dave Bankhead © 1984 Thankyou Music, Songs of Fellowship 73



## Reflection: The power of forgiveness

We are surrounded by conflict. We are a nation divided by politics: Populism, Nationalism, abuse on Facebook, violence and murder on the streets. Closer to home, broken relationships, Inner conflict - regrets for past mistakes. It can all feel rather bleak. How can we break out of this negative spiral of anger and resentment?

Jesus points us to the answer and shows us the way. After years of preaching, healing and doing good he was arrested, tried and condemned to a slow and painful death by crucifixion. Victim of such injustice what reaction might you expect? He might have called on his growing band of loyal followers to get revenge on the evil people who had done this to him. But no. On the cross, in agony, his (almost) last words were, ***“Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”*** After his death there was no retaliation - Instead his followers were motivated to take the message of God’s love and forgiveness to a needy world.

This message of forgiveness is a recurring theme in Jesus ministry. **Luke 7:36-50** is a strange tale. Jesus is dinner guest at Simon the Pharisee’s home. A woman, described as having led a sinful life, comes and kneels at Jesus feet. She washes his feet, anoints them with expensive perfume and dries them with her hair, all the time weeping. Understandably the host is embarrassed and indignant. He criticises Jesus for allowing someone with such a reputation anywhere near him.

Jesus explains to his host the reason for this strange scene and its deep significance. It’s a weird story, you might think more suited to a pulp fiction than the bible. The lady was probably a sex worker. In those days she was not seen as a good person, let alone someone a man of God would have anything to do with.

The scene was embarrassing to the host and guests present, but Jesus saw her differently. He recognised that she wanted desperately to be free of her old life and start again, desperate to be right with God and find her way to a better life. Jesus recognised in her actions that she was looking for forgiveness. He did not reject her. Her tears were a mixture of repentance for the past and thanks for her acceptance. She could hold her head up again. A door was opened to a new beginning.

Another instance of the power of forgiveness can be found in **Luke 5:17-26**. A group of friends bring a paralysed man to Jesus hoping he will heal him. Jesus is in a house surrounded by crowds listening to his teaching. In desperation they take him up

steps onto the flat roof and lifting some tiles to make a hole, lower him through. Jesus, seeing their faith and determination, says, **Your sins are forgiven**. When the crowd queried his words he said, **which is easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Get up and walk?'** Whereupon he told the man to get up and walk and he did!

Paul Tournier in 'A Drs Casebook' tells a story of a girl with anaemia. Many attempts were made to cure it without success. She was referred to another doctor who could find nothing wrong. Asked if there had been any changes in her circumstances she said, "I have recently been able to forgive someone against whom I bore a long-standing grudge. And all at once I found I could at last say "Yes" to life." Her mental attitude had changed, and the state of her blood changed along with it. Her mind was cured and so her body was on the way to being cured. The paralysed man knew he was a sinner and believed God was his enemy. Because God was his enemy he was paralysed and ill. Once Jesus had brought him the forgiveness of God, he knew God was not his enemy but his friend. The cycle of fear and anger was broken and unlocked his paralysis.

The Lord's prayer includes the phrase, **Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us**. Is this conditional? Does it mean that God will only forgive us when we forgive others? Or is it a simple fact? While we harbour resentment, we are trapped in a web of anger and bitterness. As we forgive others. Anger, bitterness and resentment fall away and there comes a great feeling of freedom to move on.

Jesus taught and lived the principle of forgiveness, healing conflicts within and between people. It is a healing thing to receive forgiveness. It is a liberating thing to offer it to another you feel has wronged you.

Jesus last words from the cross, **Father forgive**, were taken up by Martin Luther King in the civil rights struggle fifty years ago. The protesters had been savaged by police with clubs and dogs, but the civil rights marches were not only non-violent, the marchers refused to return hate for hate. The oppressive power of police, dogs and politicians was broken.

Only forgiveness can break the cycle of revenge and hate within ourselves and between ourselves and others.

## Prayerful Reflection

Have patience Lord,  
I'm in a serious bout of introspection and need to talk it through with you.

When I look into my life with honesty – as much as I can bear, that is – I realise how easily I sat in judgement and how enjoyable the process feels.

So easy to identify another person's failings and, their fault or not, I love to throw the stones of prejudice across the surface of their life and count how many times they bounce.

Yet, who am I to judge them anyway? Where do I find the arrogance to condemn whom you accept? To show dislike for those you love? To spurn the contact that might let me see the beauty underneath the skin.

Loving my neighbour – and incidentally I've never really wondered whether my neighbour finds loving me a problem too – might be a little easier if I recognise your presence in my neighbour's life. And so, I ask you Lord to help me see the glory of your image in the folk I meet today and every day. And, if I find it difficult to see, help me to look more closely with the same compassion that you use on me. And may that seed of love transform my life as well as theirs.

**The Lord's Prayer:** *Our Father .....*

*Sing, read, pray or proclaim - **Song: I am a new creation**<sup>6</sup>*

I am a new creation, no more in condemnation,  
Here in the grace of God I stand.

My heart is overflowing, my love just keeps on growing,  
Here in the grace of God I stand.

*And I will praise You Lord, yes, I will praise You Lord,  
And I will sing of all that You have done.*

A joy that knows no limit, a lightness in my spirit, here in the grace of God I stand.

## The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and evermore. Amen

<sup>6</sup> I am a new creation by Dave Bilbrough © 1983 Thankyou Music, Songs of Fellowship 197



Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September<sup>7</sup>

## GATHERING

*As we come to worship, you may like to have a time of silence and light a candle. Let us remember that wherever we are, God is with us.*

### Gathering Words

We are a gathered community, whether we are physically together in a building, or following this service via a service sheet.

We are the worshipping people of God: - gathered to pray and worship our Lord. We read scripture asking that the Holy Spirit touches our spirits as we hear again the ancient words.

**Lead us into your truth today, we pray. Amen.**

### Sing: As we are gathered Jesus is here<sup>8</sup>

As we are gathered Jesus is here  
One with each other, Jesus is here  
Joined by the Spirit, washed in the blood  
Part of the body, the church of God  
As we are gathered Jesus is here  
One with each other, Jesus is here.



### Let us come together in prayer

Loving, caring Lord, what a joy it is this morning to gather from wherever we are to be your family singing and praising Your Name. We thank you for your many gifts to us, especially for the gift of your son Jesus Christ who came to share our humanity so we might share in the riches of your love.

We thank you for your great faithfulness, your wonderful, constant love and your care that is never exhausted. A love and care which has given us the countless blessings we have and are receiving; we thank you for the innumerable good things that surround us every moment of each day.

We thank you for your guidance during the past week that has led us safely through times when we have needed you, and for leading us to help those who were themselves in need.

<sup>7</sup> Preparation and original material by Deacon Phyllis King (Reflection) and Malcolm Lindo (Prayers)

<sup>8</sup> As we are gathered by John Daniels: copyright 1979 Authentic Publishing/Adm by Copycare, Songs of Fellowship 28

We thank you also for the support you have given us when we have felt disheartened, when we have been tempted to doubt, and when we have needed your strength to carry on. **Amen**

## RECEIVING

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*Sing, read, pray or proclaim* - **Song: To be in your presence<sup>9</sup>**

To be in your presence	To rest in your presence
To sit at your feet	Not rushing away
When your love surrounds me	To cherish each moment
And makes me complete	Here I would stay

*This is my desire, O Lord,  
This is my desire  
This is my desire, O Lord  
This is my desire*

*This is my desire, O Lord, this is my desire...  
This is my desire, O Lord, this is my desire...  
This is my desire, O Lord, this is my desire.*

### Prayer

Forgiving God, although we want to be in your presence, we know also that we have failed you. We know that we do not deserve to sit at your feet, because we have turned away from your love and failed to follow your teachings.

As we remember those times, we also remember that Christ died for us and that he said, "Your sins are forgiven, go in peace and follow me". So, this morning, Lord, we ask you to forgive us. **Amen**

### Scripture Reading: Matthew 20: 1-16

### Reflect

When a child, my father told me that, during the depression of the 1920s, people queued at the labour exchange, hoping for a day's work. When there was none, his family survived on cabbage soup!

In this parable workers are lined up hoping to be chosen for a day's work. A manager would choose the fittest and strongest, those who would produce the most work in the time available - after all he had an eye on speed to gather in the crop before it was spoilt. Many waited through the heat of the day hoping to be

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<sup>9</sup> To be in your presence by Noel Richards, © 1991 Thankyou Music. Singing the Faith 530 3

chosen, perhaps, dependent on that wage for food the following day. The need was desperate and urgent.

The manager, went to the market, chose his first group of men, agreed a fair days' wage and he set them to work. We are told he went many times during the day: - 9.00am, 12.00, 3.00pm, 5.00pm selecting workers to help in the field, agreeing the wage with each group.

For the last group, who had waited all day, he questions why they were not working. *"Why are you standing here idle all day?"* They said to him, "Because no one has hired us." This makes clear to us the situation of the waiting men. We can imagine the hope diminishing and anxiety growing as they wait to be chosen.

At the end of the day he instructs his manager to pay those who were hired last, first and the workers hired early in the day, last. These first workers would have seen what the other workers had been paid.

Quite understandably they were hoping for more. They were dismayed when they were paid the same. Grumbling, 'its' not fair!', how often have we heard these words from children or even uttered them ourselves at a perceived injustice? I have to say I have a sneaking sympathy with them. It does not seem fair - we agree with the protesters!



So, Jesus teaches us about extravagant generosity, challenging our own narrow view about justice and grace. He asks "are you envious because I am generous?" We get so caught up in the story that we forget the purpose: -

In verse 1 , it explains that this parable is an illustration of the Kingdom of Heaven - Jesus is as generous to the last as the first.

If we are young, when we respond to Him, he is delighted: if old he is equally delighted.

Our response is of thankfulness, worship, and praise.

*Sing, read, pray or proclaim - Song: Only by grace can we enter*<sup>10</sup>

Only by grace can we enter,  
 Only by grace can we stand;  
 Not by our human endeavour,  
 But by the blood of the Lamb.  
 Into Your presence You call us,  
 You call us to come.  
 Into Your presence You draw us.  
 And now by Your grace we come,  
 And now by Your grace we come.

*Lord if You marked our transgressions  
 who would stand?  
 Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed  
 by the blood of the Lamb.  
 Lord if You marked our transgressions  
 who would stand?  
 Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed  
 by the blood of the Lamb.  
 Only by grace...*

### Prayers of Intercession

Just as Jesus came into our world, to help, to heal, and to save,  
 so we now pray for all those in any kind of need.

We pray for all who are suffering, the poor and hungry,  
 the oppressed and exploited, the lonely and unloved, the aged and the infirm,  
 the frightened and anxious, the helpless and the homeless.

Caring Lord, there is so much need around us,  
 in our world, our country, our neighbourhood, and in our churches.  
 So many people crying out for help.

So, in a moment of silence, we remember all those places and people  
 who are today in conflict, in need and suffering in some way.

*(you might like to name names or situations here)*

We pray that you will reach out to them in Your Love.

Loving God, we pray for our families, our friends, and members of our Churches.

*(you might like to name names or situations here)*

Give them peace, hope, and strength this day. **Amen**

**The Lord's Prayer: Our Father**

### Blessing

Our worship has not ended, it has only just begun.  
 For God is with us every moment of every day, of every year.  
 Go then with joy and a smile, to do justice, to love kindness  
 and to walk humbly with him every step along our way.

<sup>10</sup> Only by Grace by Gerrit Gustafson © 1990 Integrity Music, Singing the Faith 565



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*As we come to worship, you may like to have a time of silence and light a candle. Let us remember that wherever we are, God is with us.*

‘We will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power and the wonders he has done.’ *Psalm 78:4*

### **Prayer of Praise and Thanks**

Lord, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.  
May we never forget that whatever is happening in our lives,  
you are always there for us, always the rock on which we can safely stand.

We give you our thanks and praise  
for your constant love and unceasing care for us.  
You have shown yourself to us through our Saviour Jesus Christ  
and given us the right to call upon you when we are in need.  
You place your strong arms around us and protect us in times of trouble.  
With our feet on the rock of your love we have nothing to fear.  
All praise and thanks are yours. Amen.

*Sing, read, pray or proclaim - **Song: Jesus is Lord!**<sup>12</sup>*

1. Jesus is Lord! Creation’s voice proclaims it,  
For by His power each tree and flower was planned and made.  
Jesus is Lord! The universe declares it,  
Sun, moon and stars in heaven cry, ‘Jesus is Lord!’  
*Jesus is Lord! Jesus is Lord!*  
*Praise Him with hallelujahs for Jesus is Lord!*

2. Jesus is Lord! Yet from His throne eternal,  
In flesh He came to die in pain on Calvary’s tree.  
Jesus is Lord! From Him all life proceeding,  
Yet gave His life a ransom thus setting us free.

### **Chorus**

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<sup>11</sup> preparation and Original material by Lynne James

<sup>12</sup> Jesus is Lord by David John Mansell, Singing the faith 353



3. Jesus is Lord! O'er sin the mighty conqueror,  
From death He rose, and all His foes shall own His name.  
Jesus is Lord! God sent His Holy Spirit  
To show by works of power that Jesus is Lord.      **Chorus**

### Prayer of confession

Lord, we have so often failed you and yet each time you are there for us,  
willing to forgive and to give us another chance.

We have often despaired and not remembered,  
your great power over the universe.

We have often failed to speak out about your love to others,  
and not remembered those many who have spoken out to us,  
and brought us to know you.

Help us now Lord, to do better in the future  
and to speak your name out loud to all those in need.  
In the name of Jesus, we ask your forgiveness. **Amen.**

**The Lord's Prayer:** *Our Father .....*

**RECEIVING**

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### Scripture Reading: Matt 21: 23 -32

*Additional optional reading : Exodus 17: 1-7*

### Reflection

All through the ages, God has done his best to provide the evidence of His love that we so obviously want. The Israelites in Exodus 17 were ready to stone poor Moses if he didn't prove God's existence by striking the stone and finding a spring of precious water. Their lack of faith hurt Moses because he could see that they were putting the Lord to the test. They would believe **IF...** It's a very human reaction. And there is never an end to this demand for proof. We'll only believe **IF...**

If we didn't go round with closed minds and closed hearts, we'd all see the ton of evidence he provides every day. Even in the darkest times, there he is revealing his presence in the smallest things. Seeing God around us is a matter of having eyes to see. If you know he's there, if you believe, then you'll soon find all the evidence you'll ever need. But first we have to come off the fence and believe. It's a case of belief first and evidence second. Not a case of saying to God 'well I'll believe in you **if...**' Rather we should say to Him; 'I do believe and I trust you so much that I know

that whatever happens to me, you will always be there for me.’ This has been a vital state of mind for Christians during the pandemic. Many people around us would have preferred us to say, ‘Of course, God can destroy this plague and he will.’ But God is not a magician, parading his tricks before an audience to convince them of his worth. And he never has been.

The Jews, especially the chief priests, respected a true prophet like John the Baptist. He had all the right costumes and the tricks. But Jesus didn’t. No hair shirt, no living in the wilderness away from all those nasty sinners. No dining on locusts. Jesus went among the prostitutes and talked to tax collectors. He dined at the tables of the rich and powerful. He didn’t even have proper classes for his followers; just random chats as they followed him around. So, Jesus did not seem to have any authority to preach at all. That’s why the chief priests questioned his very identity.

Jesus had no identity crisis at all. He knew who he was and why he had been sent. But the others around him saw what they wanted to see. People thought a prophet looked and acted like John, not like Jesus. The worst doubters of all were the chief priests and teachers in the temple because they thought they already had all the answers. We’ve all met people like that. They can’t be open to new ideas, because that would mean admitting they had been wrong. And if they have all the answers, how can they be wrong?

So here in the Temple, Jesus creates a dilemma. If they admit that John’s right to baptise came from God, then they were wrong to refuse to believe what he said about Jesus. If his right was not from God, then they’d be putting themselves in an awkward position because all their followers were sure that John was a prophet. These powerful men must really hate Jesus at this moment as they are forced to admit that they don’t have all the answers. So, they sit on the fence and try to play safe politically - ‘We don’t know’.

But look what Jesus does next. He won’t accept this answer. Instead he tells them a story of two sons, knowing that they will choose the right answer this time. The elder son did the right thing because he obeyed his father, an essential requirement for a good Jew. Then Jesus makes his point. These powerful men with all the answers have behaved like the younger son. The ordinary people, the prostitutes and the tax collectors believed John and have found the path to the Kingdom, but

the elders in the Temple are still sitting on the fence, even now, when they've had even more opportunity to think about it and to do the right thing.

'We don't know' is not an acceptable answer because we have been given every opportunity to find out what the right answer should be. There are so many people sitting out there saying, well, we're not sure about this Christianity lark. I mean, where's the evidence? We don't need to go to church. We're doing alright without all that old-fashioned nonsense. And then the day comes when they have a problem. Often the best they can do is to carry on sitting on that fence and say 'we don't know'. It's one step better than saying it's all nonsense. But will it get them into the kingdom? No way. **We have to trust God and believe he does love us, for he's shown it often enough**, and not just to the Israelites in Exodus. We have to be brave enough to shout out that we do know – we know that Christ lives, and God loves us. Sharing the message is hard but it isn't hard to share the love. If we give freely from our position of strength then others will begin to believe as we do. That's the way God works. The way of Jesus.

## RESPONDING

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*Sing, read, pray or proclaim - **Song: Blessed Assurance**<sup>13</sup>*

BLESSÈD ASSURANCE, Jesus is mine:  
O what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God;  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,  
Visions of rapture burst on my sight;  
Angels descending bring from above  
Echoes of mercy, whispers of love.

*This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Saviour all the day long.  
This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Saviour all the day long.*

Perfect submission, all is at rest,  
I in my Saviour am happy and blessed;  
Watching and waiting, looking above,  
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

### Intercessions

God of all things we know that in your great love for us you hear our prayers,  
know our dreams and read our silent thoughts.

Help us to have the courage to hold fast to our beliefs  
and to share them with those around us.

Move us out of the world of shadows

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<sup>13</sup> Blessed Assurance by Frances Jane van Alstyne, Singing the Faith 549

into the light and warmth of your presence  
and show us how we can work together to build a better world for everyone.  
We pray for a way forward for all those whose life has been shattered by the  
pandemic, through loss of loved ones, home or income.  
Help them to find a path to a new less selfish way of living  
and let us not just return to our old ways.

Give us the wisdom to save our planet and those whose lives are much less  
luxurious than ours; those who have little or no food and often no means of  
finding more; those who live in areas blighted by conflict and terror and can find  
no refuge; those who have often given up hope and do not know your love.

May your light shine into all the dark and shadowy places and bring hope and  
happiness where now there is little or none. May we learn how to be your true  
servants in building this better world and in leading people of all races and creeds  
to your great love.

*.....make your own specific prayers for people and places in need today.....*

### **The Grace**

*We say the grace, imagining all those  
who join with us today.....*

May the grace of Our Lord Jesus  
Christ, the love of God  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit  
be with us now and for ever. Amen



### **Acknowledgements**

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Share these resources with others use in their own way as we worship and grow together  
despite the limitations of social distancing. Available at:

[www.westsussexcoastanddownscircuit.co.uk](http://www.westsussexcoastanddownscircuit.co.uk)

#### A Bible Study on ACTS Chapter 16, By Rev John Searle

**PREFACE** *The quotations in this passage are from the Revised English Bible (REB), but it's good to use your own New Testament, and underline verses that stand out for you (but be careful not to offend Great-Aunt Agatha, if it was a gift from her!). I will give references to particular verses, but if having to keep looking them up seems too much like hard work, ignore them. We treat the Bible with respect, but I think that studying it should be enjoyable, that it can be fun, particularly if you use your imagination (and do it with other people, after Lock-down). In a 'normal' group setting, it will provoke plenty of questions for discussion – I give one example below.\* Our prayer must be that the Spirit will enable us to see the relevance of the passage to life -to life in today's world. So a good place to begin is, no! not Brexit, but Covid-19.*

One of the positive spin-offs of the Lockdown, is the way people in all walks of life have adapted to the situation and have found new ways of doing things. The Church, too, has had to devise a variety of innovative devotional material, available by email, telephone, Facebook, Twitter, and for Luddites (like me) 'Pigeon' Post. As a bonus, those who don't usually come to church, are now receiving the gospel ('good news') direct to their homes.

The Acts of the Apostles is the story of how that "good news" began to spread in 1AD, and there are many similarities with the times in which we are living today. Acts 16, for instance, is a kind of parable on the theme, "God may close one door but always opens another". The chapter begins with St Paul off on his second mission journey, destination, Asia Minor (*your Bible may have a relevant map, probably hidden somewhere at the back*). I'm sorry to say, that St Paul has had a mega row with St Barnabas, who wanted to take John Mark with them. St Paul "insisted" that a man like Mark, who had previously "deserted" them, was too unreliable. The "dispute was so sharp that they had parted company" (Acts 15:39 - *Isn't it reassuring to know that Saints are actually human? By the way, in the interests of equality, I'll omit any further refs. to Sainthood – after all, it was the Church which later conferred these awards. Shouldn't that be left to God?*) Paul is now two men short on his campaign team. He chooses Silas as one replacement and then does some serious head-hunting. In Lystra, he spots Timothy – young, keen, having a gap-year (?); he has a good c.v. and is "well spoken of" by the local Christians, regarded as a "disciple" (16:1,2 - *i.e. a 'learner', a kind of 'Probationer Minister'*). But there is a snag. They may encounter racial prejudice; Timothy's father is Greek, and that makes his son a Gentile, a non-Jew. And, although his Mother is a born Jew, she's become a Christian, so to strict Jews, she's an apostate (*'add to Dictionary'?*). Timothy could be a liability if they encounter any anti-Gentile extremists. So, Paul thinks up a cunning plan – simple: have him circumcised (*then he'd count as a kind of honorary Jew*). However, hold on! Paul has only just decreed that Gentiles converted to Christianity do *not* require circumcision. If he is the first to break his own rules (*sounds familiar?*), he could be accused of cowardly inconsistency. To his credit, Timothy agrees to undergo the procedure, a painful operation, particularly if performed by an amateur, without anaesthetic (*ouch!*). To 'add insult to injury' (*literally*), I

believe that Paul has decided to do the surgery, himself. Yes, I'm aware your Bible (*and mine*) probably says (v.3), "he (i.e. *Paul*) had him circumcised", but the original Greek is literally: "having taken (him) *he* (i.e. *Paul*) circumcised him." (*italics mine*). *If you are now feeling, like the Telly Ad., 'confused.com', just forget I ever mentioned the possibility).*

Hopefully, Timothy has recovered before they set off on their journey into the unknown; actually, not entirely unknown, because Paul, without the benefit of a Sat Nav, has worked out a route-map with the key towns as mission targets. But they also have some postal duties to fulfil. They've been entrusted with news of important decisions made by the "apostles and elders" at a 'Conference' held recently in Jerusalem (v.4). Do we sense a certain reluctance to be down-graded to mere 'Conference postmen'? Nonetheless, they are about to learn a valuable lesson, because as "they made their way from town to town..... day by day, the churches (they visited) grew stronger in faith and increased in numbers" (vv.4,5), a good example of successful multi-tasking! They travel on "through the Phrygian and Galatian region" (*see your map*), when, without warning, the Lord intervenes and they are "prevented by the Holy Spirit from delivering the message in the province of Asia."(vv.5,6) Although frustrating, they change direction, but as they approach the Mysian border and try to enter Bithynia, "the *Spirit of Jesus (an unusual phrase)* would not allow them" (v.7). Thwarted again, they travel (on foot and/or on horseback?) non-stop through Mysia and reach the coast at Troas."(v.8) Having slammed shut *their* chosen door, the Lord now opens one of his own. Paul has a vivid dream in which, "a Macedonian stood there appealing to him, "Cross over to Macedonia and help us." The apostle awakens "convinced that God had called us to take the good news there." (vv.9) Luke, a physician, must have joined them at this point, because, like our Queen, he uses the 'royal plural' (e.g. *us* v.9/*we* v.10) as he takes over as narrator. I can't help wondering if the good Lord has planned a little treat, perhaps as compensation for disrupting *their* planned itinerary. They now embark on a short sea trip, probably in steerage ('*Economy Class*'?), only about three days, just long enough to get their sea-legs. To be honest, 'three days' is an *estimate*, based on Luke's observation that, "We sailed from Troas and made a *straight run* to Samothrace" (v.11) meaning they sailed before a following wind, not needing to spend time having to tack (*i.e. 'zigzag': I add this nugget of information, as a former dinghy-sailor, to impress you with my nautical know-how!*) Then, sailing via Neapolis, they land at Philippi, not on Paul's original itinerary, nonetheless "a leading city in that district of Macedonia and a Roman colony."(v.12)

What happens next only goes to show that, once more, God 'has his reasons'. On the sabbath, they go down to the River Gate where the Christian women are holding a Prayer Meeting. Paul and Silas sit down with them and start to 'gossip the gospel' (*strange there's no mention of the other two.*) Lydia, from Thyatira is one of the women sitting chatting. She's unusual, a successful business-woman in a man's world, a "dealer in purple fabric" (v.14). She would be a dead cert. on 'Dragon's Den', but on this occasion, it's Paul who 'makes the winning pitch' - for Christ! Bingo! (*sorry, 'Amen'!*) Lydia "and her household were all baptised" (v.15), presumably, there and then, in the river which is conveniently nearby. This is VERY significant for *us*, because they are the *first EUROPEAN converts!* 'Three cheers!' Hurrah!' (or 'Hallelujah!')

Now that Lydia's a fellow believer, she insists that the missionaries lodge with her (*she must be wealthy to have a house large enough to accommodate everyone. I expect it was free of charge, as they are currently un-employed*). Her offer of hospitality sets them free to concentrate on spreading the gospel across the city.

By now, it is obvious to Paul and his companions that God has brought them to the right place at the right time. However, they are confronted with a threatening situation involving a slave-girl and her crooked owners. Dr Luke's diagnosis is that she has a severe mental illness. She is a compulsive 'stalker,' following Paul and co. "day after day", shouting at them. She's not 'mad', far from it, she recognises that Paul and Silas are "servants of the most High God" who are "declaring to you a way of salvation"(v.17). However, Paul doesn't need her to do his preaching for him and, thoroughly exasperated (*even saints can 'lose their cool'*), rounds on her, and addressing what he believes is an 'evil spirit', cries, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her"(v.18). That silences her (*at least, for the time being*) and her cure is instantaneous! However, the girl's 'owners', who are exploiting her for public entertainment (*and worse?*), are furious at the potential loss of income. They drag Paul and Silas before the magistrates on a spurious charge of 'disturbing the peace'. The girl's masters have engaged the local 'rent-a-mob', who start beating up the two disciples. Luke and Timothy appear to have slipped away. The magistrates, fearing an escalation of violence, adopt Pilate's 'Riot Calm' strategy (*see Mark 14:15 et al*), and order the unfortunate duo to be stripped, flogged and thrown into jail. However, Paul and Silas have come to realise that even the worst situation can be an opportunity to preach the gospel. At midnight, they are praying and singing some favourite hymns when, suddenly, there's a violent eruption, the prison doors fly open, the captors chains fall off (*see Charles Wesley's famous hymn*), and the sleeping Jailer awakes in a panic. Thinking there's been a jail-break and a mass escape, he's about to kill himself when, in the nick of time, Paul stops him. Shaking with fear, the Jailer cries, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" In all probability, he was simply asking, surprisingly politely, what he could do to save his own skin. However, the missionaries turn the question to their advantage by giving a truly Life-Saving reply, "Put your trust in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."(v.31) I guess that Paul and Silas have to explain to the household what "salvation" means (v.32), and then "at that late hour"(*note eye-witness detail*), the Jailer washes their wounds, and "he and his whole family were baptised without delay"(v.33). He takes them back to his house, gives them a meal and "rejoiced with his whole household in his new-found faith in God." (v.34) Next day, Paul exercises his rights as a Roman citizen and demands a public apology by the magistrates for sentencing them without trial. The magistrates are forced to comply and meekly request Paul and Silas to get out of town a.s.a.p. After a brief visit to Lydia's house to encourage the new converts and say 'farewell', they depart.

Like a good serial story, Act 16 ends on a 'cliff-hanger'. Observant readers will have noticed that, at some point, the original narrator has taken back the Reporter's quill', but has not told us what's happened to Timothy and the Doctor (*not to be confused with popular TV prog.*). To find out, we will need to read what follows on. This chapter has featured some of the first "ambassadors of Christ". They went forth, as do Christ's ambassadors today, into the unknown – but never *alone*, for they go: **"Quo monstrat Dominus" – "Where the Lord shows (the Way)"**

*The Latin inscription is on the heraldic crest of 'Handsworth', a former Methodist Ministerial Training College. Its implication of both reassurance and challenge is echoed time and again in Scripture, see, for instance, in the New Testament: Acts 16:17, Jn. 14:6, 1 Cor. 12:31b, Heb. 10:20 & others.*

\* An incident in the passage which could stimulate further thought or discussion:

*"HYMN SINGING AT MIDNIGHT" (v.25) - Imagine you are lying awake in that prison cell, listening to the singing duo. Do you think this is an example of:*

*(1) Effective Christian witness? Or,*

*(2) A counter-productive act of insensitivity to the needs of other people?*

*(3) Can you think of similar ethical dilemmas in the present exercise of "social distancing"?*