

twelvebaskets



LENT 5B

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fifth Sunday in Lent - Year B
17th March 2024



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

20 STF – Be still, for the presence of the Lord OR

28 STF – Jesus calls us here to meet him

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

33 STF – O Lord we are always in your presence OR

87 STF – Praise to the living God!

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Hymn:

513 STF – Take this moment, sign, and space OR

446 STF – I will offer up my life

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

361 STF – Man of Sorrows! What a name OR

505 STF – More like you, Jesus, more like you

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

319 STF – Christ triumphant, ever reigning OR

674 STF – Would I have answered when you called

Blessing

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Call to worship

Beyond these walls of worship, there is a world crying out for meaning and hope. As we gather together and sing your praises, O God, we ask that you will inspire and equip us to channel your love, hope and peace out into the lives of those we will meet this week, and all creation.
Amen.¹

Hymn:

20 STF – Be still, for the presence of the Lord OR

28 STF – Jesus calls us here to meet him

Opening Prayers

During Lent, All We Can are inviting people to ask the question ‘What is Mine to Do?’ Recognising that discerning where our voice and actions are most needed is a key part of justice-seeking. Each week, they are focussing on one word which represents one possible answer to that question. In Week 5 of Lent, that word is Pledge (particularly relating to legacies). Find out more at allwecan.org.uk/resources

Everlasting Father,

Thank you that our short time on Earth is only a tiny part of your overarching act of redemption.

We praise you that even though our time may be short, you still choose to meaningfully involve and include us in your mission – giving us freedom to discern your will, not passively receive it.

Teach me, O Lord

What is mine to do

We also thank you, Lord, that our part in your redemption story is not limited to the time we are alive. Help us to consider the many ways we can leave a legacy that serves your Kingdom. Whether that be through the effect our life of service has on others, or through what we pass on in our Will.

Teach me, O Lord

What is mine to do

We are sorry, Lord, when we are afflicted by short-termism. When we think only of the problems immediately in front of us, not recognising how we best plan for the future. Whether that be in our politics, in the church, or in our communities, help us pledge to serve you now and in the future.

Teach me, O Lord

What is mine to do

As you have pledged your unfailing love to us, we pledge ourselves today and everyday to you in worship.

Teach me, O Lord

What is mine to do

Amen.²

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by All We Can

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Materials needed: soil, seeds, small pots (yoghurt pots from recycling perhaps).

There is a lyric in the musical Hamilton, where Thomas Jefferson raps: "Every action has its equal, opposite reactions". In a way, Jesus' explanation here, using a seed as an allegory for his own life, expresses a similar sentiment. If a seed dies, it will produce many more seeds. Death leads to life. A theme throughout the Bible. Jesus' death brings us life. Here, in Lent, we walk through this season of death leading to life.

At the start of Lent, many people will have committed to giving something up. Who here gave something up this Lent? Sweets? Chocolate? Caffeine? Any other examples?

Some people take up something new, using Lent as an opportunity to grow a new skill or develop a new talent. Anyone?

Whether giving something up or learning something new, the practice of doing this during Lent is to help us walk in step with Jesus. In this passage, Jesus reminds us that to serve Jesus is to follow him. We walk in his footsteps, facing temptations, facing struggle and death. Developing our discipline of fasting from the things we enjoy (sometimes too much!) is a way for us to reflect in a small way on the sacrifice that Jesus made. We, in our own small way, begin to feel the temporary effect of losing something we value. We feel loss but gain understanding. Opposite reactions.

So, when Jesus talks about his death, he does so with the full knowledge that his death will bring life. The sadness at his crucifixion will be offset by a glorious resurrection. A seed buried in the ground will not stagnate but instead roots will grow, a stem will burst through, and a plant will appear with new seeds. There is death followed by life.

In our own lives we can have this hope. What are the areas or parts in your life where you need to see hope? You need to see life instead of death? What habits or situations do you need to be changed? We are going to take some time to plant our own seeds. Consider planting a prayer for yourself or a situation that is on your heart. Where do you need to see an opposite reaction and growth happening? As you gather the soil and plant your seed, ask God to bring life to the situation on your heart.

[Activity: Ask people to come and make their seedling pots.]

God of life,

We ask that you will help us to grow and produce fruit, in your name. We give you the things in our lives that need to die and fall away, and pray that you will bring new life and hope.

Amen.³

Hymn:

33 STF – O Lord we are always in your presence OR

87 STF – Praise to the living God!

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

³ All Age Talk written by Sheila Matthews

Hymn:

513 STF – Take this moment, sign, and space OR

446 STF – I will offer up my life

Reflections on the readings

In today's reading from Jeremiah, we find the people of Israel in the midst of a deep struggle. Throughout the book of Jeremiah, we have encountered the people of Israel in exile, living in Babylon and having strayed from God. They haven't been faithful to the promises they made to God in the old covenant, and in response they have been threatened with the destruction of their towns and cities. In the midst of this doom and gloom, we reach chapter 31. Here, we are introduced to something different – a 'new covenant'. In this passage, God makes the people a promise, a commitment to a new way of life different from the one experienced by their ancestors. In the midst of the consequences of broken promises, God is lifting up their eyes towards a different future.

There are three things I want to draw out today from the bible passages we've heard, that help us to consider what this new covenant meant for the people of Israel, and what it means for us today.

Firstly, the new covenant is personal. We know that the substance of this covenant is the same as the original one God made with the people, when they initially went into exile. God's law is still at the heart of it – to love your God with all your heart, and to love your neighbour. What is different this time is that God declares the understanding of this calling will be set within each person, 'written on their hearts', part of our very nature. God's promise invites each person into direct, personal relationship with God. We are called to know God's love for us directly, and to be invited personally to love God in return. Jeremiah writes about how this will feel different from what's gone before – that instead of needing to rely on a few special people to know about God everyone will be invited to know God for themselves.

Forgiveness is an important part of this promise – God says that in making the covenant afresh, the people's sins won't be remembered anymore. As God works in each of us to rewrite God's love upon our hearts, God confronts the challenges and questioning that resides in all of us. This is intimate – for God to forgive us, to write upon our hearts, first God has to know us – in all the messiness and complication. This is scary. We can hear the challenge of this calling to let God into the messiness in our psalm for today, as King David calls on God to forgive his sins and create in him a clean heart. David is forced to face up to his sinfulness, and all the ways that he feels like he has failed God. He knows that God longs for much more from him, and longs himself to live life anew. He is ready for the messy work God needs to do to create a clean heart in him.

The good news is that in making this new promise, God faces our challenges head on, determined to forgive. God is not content with being at a distance from us – in this new covenant, God commits to embracing all that we are. Just as David longs to be in the presence of God, in the promise of the new covenant, we see this very longing fulfilled. By forgiving our sins and inviting us into personal relationship, God is calling each of us into new life.

Have you ever felt like you observe Jesus from a distance? As we approach Palm Sunday and Holy Week, we're going to hear lots about the crowds that gathered around to just catch a glimpse of Jesus – climbing up trees, leaning out of windows. Perhaps you've felt before like someone at the back of that crowd, standing on tip-toes, relying on snippets of conversation from other people to tell you what Jesus looks like as he comes past. Perhaps you've stood at the back on purpose, fearful of getting the dirt from the dusty robes kicked

up on your new robes, or nervous that someone might turn to you and ask what you're doing here. It can be easier to stand at the back, to blend into the crowd. It's easy to convince ourselves that our presence isn't wanted, or needed, or even noticed.

But the striking, demanding message of God's new covenant is that wherever we stand, whatever we bring with us – God's presence is not something that exists elsewhere, for us to avoid or miss out on. God's presence is personal, deeply set within our hearts. God is ready to come into our messiness, and begin anew.

When God declares the new covenant in this passage from Jeremiah, the language is very strong. God's commitment is confident – this new covenant will happen, and God will be the one to make it so. But a covenant is an agreement – a partnership. It requires at least two parties to get involved. Here, it really sounds like God is doing most of the heavy lifting! But the second thing I wanted to highlight today is that this new covenant still requires us to do some of the work.

When we encounter David in today's psalm, we can hear the pain in his voice. As he speaks, he shows that he really knows all that God can offer him – that God offers a steadfast love, and is merciful, and truthful. But despite knowing all of these things, David has still lived in a way that has denied God. He has done things that he knows don't live up to the promise God has made to him, and that he needs change. It's striking to hear these two truths right next to one another. At the same time, David is both confident of God's love, and convicted by all the ways in which he has denied it. Despite God's promise to know and love us, we can still fall short of our calling to love God in response, and love our neighbour as we have first been loved.

Today's passage from Hebrews is a tricky passage to get our heads around, but in it we find a similar situation. In verses seven and eight, the writer describes Jesus crying out to God in tears. If anyone knows the truth of God's promise to know and love us in our messiness, it's Jesus. And yet we still encounter him in this passage confronted by the challenge of living in a way that honours the fullness of God's new covenant, and longing for God's support in living a life which honours God's love.

The reality is, just because God offers this personal, intimate relationship with us it doesn't mean everything is resolved. As David expresses – we have a part to play here too. We are called to recognise all that we are – as complicated and messy as that is – and to face up to every way we don't live up to our part of the bargain – to love God, and love our neighbour. But, as David and Jesus both cry out to God, we are invited to remember that God's new covenant means partnership. We do not face up to our challenges in our own strength. In fact, if we tried to, it just wouldn't be enough. Instead, we need God's Holy Spirit, present amongst us, to sustain a spirit 'willing' to begin anew.

All of this is deeply personal. The revelation of God's new covenant is that God draws near to each one of us. It is intimate, and it is individual. But the final thing I wanted to share today is that despite beginning in each one of us, we can be confident that God's new covenant has implications for the whole world. In our passage from John, Jesus talks about a grain of wheat, which bears much fruit only after it falls to the earth and dies, saying that 'those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life'. Jesus goes on to talk about his own death, and perhaps is using this illustration to remind those around him that the challenges of the coming days will lead to much greater things. But equally, in Jesus's call to follow him, here we are reminded that although God's love for us is deeply personal, it must not stop there.

God meets us in the very heart of our being, and wants to encounter us personally, and directly. But as God meets us in love, we are called to offer up our lives for God's service – to love God, and our neighbour. As we let go of our lives, we see the fruit of God's love in

action in the world around us. Jesus's death and life is the greatest model of this calling for us as followers of Christ – that we might take up our lives and follow him, in all things. Towards the end of the passage, Jesus promises to draw all people to himself. Once again, we hear this invitation to relationship, that those who encounter God are invited in to transformation. Our personal, loving relationships with God are not for ourselves alone – but are for the transformation of all God loves.

Questions for discussion:

- When have you stood at the back of the crowd, worried to get personal in your relationship with God? What fears and worries stopped you?
- What is the impact of a personal relationship with God in your life? How have you seen it change the way you live?
- What does it mean to give up our lives, and see them bear fruit? What actions could you take this week that would mean loving God and your neighbour, by giving up something of yourself?⁴

Hymn:

361 STF – Man of Sorrows! What a name OR

505 STF – More like you, Jesus, more like you

Prayers of intercession

Throughout these prayers, you are invited to join in two actions. When we pray for ourselves, please place your hands over your heart. When we pray for the world, please extend your hands out in a form of offering,

Place your hands on your heart

God of steadfast love,
Thank you that you seek us out,
to show us personally how deeply you care for us.
Thank you that you want to know us,
deeply and intimately,
and call us into new life with you.

God, we lament that we have not always responded to your love
with love of our own.

We are sorry for where we have ignored your invitation
to trust in the law you have written on our hearts.

We long to be surrounded by your presence,
that by the power of the holy spirit your perfect love would cast out
our fear and worry, that we may experience the joy of you with us.

Extend your hands outwards

Creator God,
Thank you that your love for us is part of your great outpouring of love for the world.
Thank you that we see your care in the life of all you have created,
From tiny seed to flourishing fruits.
May we be reminded of your goodness in all that surrounds us,
Constantly aware of your presence in the fullness of created life.

⁴ Reflection written by Hannah Fremont-Brown

God, we are sorry where the ways we have denied your love have also denied life to your creation.

Where we have been selfish with resources,

Greedy with desire and mindless in relationships.

We long to live in a way where your love pours out from us and into your creation, that all we have and all we are, are signs of your endless mercy.

Create in us a clean heart, that we might begin anew.

Place your hands on your heart

God create in me a heart that longs for you,

that I may love you deeply, worship you always, and trust in your everlasting life.

Extend your hands out

Give me the trust to offer out my life in your service,

That from the small seed of faith mighty trees would grow.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

God of all grace,

May you be at work in our gift-giving, so that the financial gifts we have given today, and the gifts that each of us represent, can be used for the transformation of lives, hearts, climate, creation and the whole cosmos.

Come, Lord Jesus,

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

319 STF – Christ triumphant, ever reigning OR

674 STF – Would I have answered when you called

Blessing

We will go out with joy, and be sent forth with peace.

May the Spirit of God go with you, that you might be a person of peace to all who you meet this week.

May you know the light of love in your life,

And trust in Jesus every step of the way,

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Hannah Fremont-Brown

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker