

At Home Service - Sunday 23 January 2022 (Prepared by Graham Skedgell)

“And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10 verses 24-25)

As we worship, let us praise God in the words of this hymn, which reminds us of many of the reasons why Jesus came, and why he still does!

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes,
The Saviour promised long;
Let every heart prepare a throne,
And every voice a song.

He comes the broken heart to bind,
The bleeding soul to cure,
And with the treasures of his grace
To enrich the humble poor.

He comes, the prisoners to release,
In Satan's bondage held;
The gates of brass before him burst,
The iron fetters yield.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of peace,
Thy welcome shall proclaim,
And Heaven's eternal arches ring
With thy beloved Name.

Let us pray

O Lord, our Lord, how excellent, how majestic, how wonderful, is your name in all the earth.

Father, as we come to you now, we bow in awe. We kneel before you, and acknowledge you to be the Lord of life. The Lord of everything that is, and of everything that is to come. And we acknowledge, too, our own unworthiness.

And so we come.

But we thank you, Father, that we can come into your presence because Jesus has opened up the way for us to come, and to be brought into a living relationship with you. We know too, that it is by your grace, through faith, that we come. Not through any merit or goodness of our own.

And so we come.

We come, aware of your love for us, and our need of you, aware that it is only by the power of your Holy Spirit working in us, that we can see and experience your hand at work in our lives, and in the life of the world.

And so we come. AMEN

The Lord's prayer

Gospel reading: Luke 4 verses 14-21

Another hymn with a similar message

Come, thou long-expected Jesus,
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.

Born thy people to deliver,
Born a child, and yet a King,
Born to reign in us for ever,
Now thy gracious kingdom bring.

Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear Desire of ev'ry nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone;
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Scripture reading: Hebrews 10 verses 19-25

Prayers of intercession

Father, as we look around us, we see

- so much that is wrong,
- so much that is unholy,
- so much that is unjust,
- so much that is far from what you desire.

So we pray for the world, in all its brokenness. For the leaders of nations, that they may seek after ways of justice and peace. For our own government, that it may act in ways that bring help to those who need it most. That it may support the weak, strengthen the weary, and uphold the poor. And give to all those who need help, both here, and throughout the world.

We pray for our local communities, thanking you for all the good that is being done, and that has been done, through these difficult times. May we not neglect the needy, but may we continue to do for others all the good we can, in all the ways we can.

We pray for ourselves. That you will increase our faith, and raise our eyes in expectation, as you work in and through us. To put our trust in you, and believe that *“Everything is possible for one who believes.”* And to say in those times when our faith is weak, *“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!”* AMEN

Reflection

At the beginning of his active ministry, you'll recall that as he was **baptised** by John the Baptist, Jesus was **anointed** by the Holy Spirit, and shortly afterwards, **tempted** by the devil in the wilderness. He then returned to Galilee, on the crest of a wave of news about him spreading through the whole countryside.

And as he taught in the synagogues, we read that **everyone praised him**. When he then went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, we read that on the Sabbath day, he went into the synagogue, where he stood up to read from the Scriptures. There was nothing unusual about that. I'm sure he had done it many times. What is interesting about the gospel account, is that Luke tells us that he went into the synagogue, **as was his custom**.

If we now fast-forward over 2000 years, there are lots of reasons why people go to Churches and Chapels today - to the equivalent of the Jewish synagogue - Sunday by Sunday. One reason is that it's their **custom** to do so. In other words, it's what they do on Sundays. It's part of the rhythm of their lives. Just as it's their custom to do other things, on other days during the week. It's a habit. And it's a good habit. There are lots of other things people could do on Sundays, but it's a choice they make.

We could delve much deeper to discover *why* people attend Church. What they are looking for. What they are expecting. And we would discover a wide range of reasons. But for now, we simply note that in the same way as it was Jesus' custom to go to the local synagogue, so it's the custom of millions of people throughout the world, to do the same today.

But what if that routine is broken? What if something happens to prevent us from going to Church on a Sunday? What if a disaster happens and we're not allowed to gather with others for worship? What then? That routine changes. Perhaps we watch a televised broadcast instead. Or perhaps we watch a service being live-streamed via the internet. Perhaps we have an act of worship at home. And perhaps we do these things for a few weeks, expecting everything to quickly return to normal

But what if the weeks turn into months, and the months turn into years? What then? And what then if we are once more allowed to attend Church in person; socially-distanced of course; with sanitised hands and a pure heart? Are we confident of doing so? Or do we decide to wait a few more weeks, just in case? Is our desire to worship strong enough to overcome any concerns we may have, so that we cross the threshold once again? Or do we settle in to our new routine at home, and watch it all on the telly? Let me say I'm aware that some people are unable to return at the moment, because of genuine health or other reasons. But sadly, there are some whose desire has grown less.

These are deeply personal questions. They are real questions that we have been wrestling with. But it reminds us how important our customs are. Jesus went into the synagogue, **as was his custom**.

If we delve deeper, it's not difficult to see what people lose by not meeting with others. It's not difficult to see how the whole body of the Church suffers, how its life is diminished. We often use words like fellowship. It's not a word that is used much by people in everyday life. But it's a word that touches on something deep between us. And it's hugely important.

You've probably heard the illustration of a visit made by a member of a Church to someone who had stopped attending. The man said that he could be a Christian without going to Church. And as they sat and talked in front of an open fire, the other man took a nub of coal and placed it in the hearth where it glowed brightly. But as they watched, its glow gradually got dimmer, until finally it went dark. No more words were necessary. It illustrated so clearly what can happen to those who withdraw from fellowship. Their faith can begin to lose its glow. And in time, it can even go out.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer stresses the need to persevere in the faith; to keep going. And that's not always easy because there are so many things that can easily distract us. Again, in my own experience as a child, my father and I used to go to motorbike scrambles, as they were called then: my father being a lifelong motorcyclist. We often used to meet one of his brothers, also a motorcyclist, and his son, and we would have a great time together. But over time, these events moved, as did many other things, from being held on Saturdays to Sundays. And for me, that was a problem. Should I continue to go to Church, or should I go instead to a scramble? It wasn't an easy decision for a young boy to make. There was nothing wrong with scrambles. They were great fun. But were they more important than attending Church? Were they in danger of becoming a distraction?

The writer to the Hebrews urges his readers to persevere in the faith. In other words, not to give up. And one of the things we can do to nurture our faith, is to meet in fellowship with other believers. Meeting with others is a real privilege. which I'm sure you value as much as I do. We may come, as Jesus did, because it's our custom to come, but we also come, as Jesus did, to give thanks and praise to God our Father. To worship him. That's the real reason we come. To worship God. And in doing so, we join with others who desire to do

the same thing, There is something very special about worshipping God with others. It's certainly not something we should ever neglect.

The writer to the Hebrews says much the same thing. He says, "*And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*" So another reason for meeting with others is to "*spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*" and to "*encourage one another.*"

It's possible to worship God on our own, and we do that every day in our workaday lives. But joining with others is important and special. And of course it's something we can do at other times, perhaps in a housegroup, or over coffee. The Christian life is not an easy life. At times, it can be very difficult. But what encouragement we can give and receive from other believers.

So let's keep going. Let's continue to love and serve God in all the ways we can. And let's spur each other on, by encouraging each other in the faith. And if we know of any who have got out of the habit of attending Church, let's do what we can to encourage them back. Let's tell them how much we miss them, and how we are the poorer when they stay away.

Jesus went into the synagogue because it was his custom to do so. That sounds like a very good reason for us, as his followers, to do the same. **Amen**

1 The church of Christ in every age,
beset by change but Spirit led,
must claim and test its heritage
and keep on rising from the dead.

2 Across the world, across the street,
the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live until they die.

3 Then let the servant church arise,
a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.

4 For Christ alone, whose blood was shed,
can cure the fever in our blood,
and teach us how to share our bread
and feed the starving multitude.

5 We have no mission but to serve
in full obedience to our Lord:
to care for all, with out reserve,
and spread Christ's liberating word

Blessing Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! **Amen.**