

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Kathleen Richardson. If you are well enough and able, why not spend a few moments with God, perhaps at a time when you would normally be sharing with others in church - pray for them as they pray for you.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

(Some prayers are adapted from the writings of Julie Hulme, and the prayers of intercession are those prepared for the beginning of Christian Aid Week)

Call to Worship

Come and hear what the Lord has done, the unknown God, unseen, unnamed, has brought into being all that is – all peoples and all nations, and time and space for all to live, and room to search for truth and love:
has shown his face in Jesus Christ – a man who lived, wept, and smiled, who brings new life from grief and death:
has breathed a Holy Spirit – of wisdom and strength, of freedom and life, a spirit who lifts our hearts to sing.

Hymn King of kings, Majesty (Singing the Faith 331) - A hymn of praise and adoration

Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKAQvIEotc8>

King of kings, majesty, God of heaven living in me.
Gentle Saviour, closest Friend, strong Deliverer, Beginning and End, all within me falls at your throne:

*Your majesty, I can but bow; I lay my all before you now
in royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve your majesty.*

Earth and heaven worship you, Love eternal, faithful and true,
who bought the nations, ransomed souls, brought this sinner near to your throne; all within me cries out in praise:

*Your majesty, I can but bow; I lay my all before you now
in royal robes I don't deserve, I live to serve your majesty.*

Jarrood Cooper

Prayer of Adoration

Gracious God, in you we live and move and all we are is known to you –
the depths of fear and the heights of hope, and the endlessness of our need for love:

Loving God, we adore you.

In you is space and breadth and room for each of us to be ourselves –

to stretch and breathe, to laugh and weep, and sound the songs we long to sing:

Loving God, we adore you.

In you is time and strength to wait for each of us to dare to dream and trust our hope,
that you are love which does not end – but ever holds us safe and close:

Loving God, we adore you.

In you we find ourselves fulfilled – the unknown God, unseen, unnamed,
the great I AM who is, for us, the word of life, made flesh, come true:

Living God, we adore you.

Prayer of Confession

Gracious God, whose love is everlasting, we dare to ask your forgiveness for our sins and our failures:

for fearing the unknown and failing to search and seek after truth;

for fearing the faith of others and limiting your love to people like us;

for being content with the outward form of religion and being afraid to change for good;

for placing our trust in money and status, and failing to worship in openness and trust;

for doubting your ability to make all things new.

Silence for our own confessions

Assurance of Forgiveness

The Lord is good and quick to forgive. Let us trust in his word and make a new start, to the glory of God. Amen.

Readings

In these Sundays after Easter, the principal readings are from The Acts of the Apostles – and we are invited to see how the early disciples began to live out their experience of the resurrection. Today we hear what happened when Peter was persuaded to go into the house of Cornelius, a gentile, a Roman centurion. Peter spoke of the resurrection, ending his testimony of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus by saying, ‘All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.’

Acts 10: 44-48

While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said, “Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” So he ordered them to be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

The second reading looks back to conversations between Jesus and the disciples immediately before the crucifixion, when Jesus is preparing the disciples for what will come.

John 15: 9-17

Jesus said, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s

life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

Reflection

There had been two strange happenings that prepared for this encounter between Peter and Cornelius. The previous day Peter had fallen asleep on a rooftop while waiting for a meal to be prepared and had had a dream in which he was presented with food which it was forbidden in the scriptures for a strict Jew to eat. Three times he refused but then he heard the voice of God telling him not to declare unclean what God had made clean.

And four days earlier, the Roman centurion, Cornelius, while praying, had received a vision of a man in dazzling white clothes telling him to send to Joppa and ask Simon Peter to come. He had asked Peter to come and called together his

relatives and close friends to meet him. Peter had the sense to recognise his dream and this invitation as a message from God and went to Caesarea – a journey of around 40 miles, taking with him a group of believers.

Here God is at work on two fronts – both within the new church of Jesus and outside it. It is God who takes the initiative.

Peter was only just getting into his sermon when the Holy Spirit interrupted the proceedings.

I don't think we can overestimate the shock that Peter, and the circumcised Jews who accompanied him to the house of Cornelius, received when the Holy Spirit so obviously and with such conviction fell on the gentiles who had heard Peter speak. Oh yes, Peter had spoken of his belief that God would forgive anyone who turned to him – but to then be faced with a group of Spirit-filled gentile Christians was a shock to the system.

It had taken Peter and his companions three years of walking and talking with Jesus, gradually beginning to understand the power of his healing and his interpretation of the scriptures; experiencing the traumatic events of the crucifixion and the resurrection appearances. Being convinced that God had

indeed forgiven them for their failings and slowness to believe and then experienced the power and the awakening of their minds and hearts by the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (which in the quirkiness of our lectionary we don't actually celebrate for another two weeks!)

Here they are presented with a group of gentiles who know little or nothing of the prophecies of the Messiah, are not circumcised or born into the Jewish tradition or brought up to obey the law, but who show unmistakable signs of God endowing them with the Holy Spirit.

Faced with this evidence all Peter can say is, "Can anyone withhold the water of baptism for these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

Fortunately, on that occasion there seems to have been no one to object – though it was a slightly different reception Peter had when he returned to Jerusalem, where the church leaders there criticized him for entering the house and eating with gentiles, let alone promising baptism. He managed to convince them by saying "If God gave them the same gift he gave us when we believed, who was I that I could hinder God?"

As the early church had to face these questions, they are also things that today's church faces.

The 'established' churches are being challenged by the growth of Christian groups that arise out of the experience of people who come to faith through different ways and have different ways of responding to the call of God and want different forms of worship.

I suspect many of us reading or listening to this service came through a long apprenticeship – Sunday school, school assemblies, religious education lessons, church youth groups, confirmation classes. The concept of God, the pattern of Jesus, the celebration of Christian festivals brought us to a point of being willing to sign up, as it were, to belonging to the family of the church. Some of us can also identify a moment or a season when all this learning seemed as nothing compared to an overwhelming experience of a face-to-face encounter with God in which we felt we knew and were known in a different way.

But there may also be those who experienced the intervention of the Holy Spirit in a powerful way and will spend the rest of our lives catching up on what this means.

We are living through a tsunami of change. The church must be affected by what has happened in the pandemic. There will be those for whom the absence of church attendance has revealed the paucity of their faith and they may not return to worship in the same way. Others have tapped into other on-line resources and found their faith stretched and deepened and will want to experience different forms of public worship. Some have come to faith for the first time and will want to know how to translate those yearnings and feelings into daily life and action.

The readings today point us to the wisdom of Jesus in appointing Peter to leadership, however unlikely it had seemed. We must be grateful for leaders who will be open to new ways of being faithful which allow for God to be at work in unlikely places and make us more ready to learn from the varied experience of others.

The greatest comfort and the greatest challenge from the readings of today is that God does not depend entirely on us – God will work God's purpose out – our role is to recognise and rejoice when this happens.

But as the passage from John reminds us. Jesus calls us friends who know what the master is doing and therefore we do carry some responsibility for what happens in his world.

As we turn to prayer, we use material offered to the church at the beginning of Christian Aid week – for a restoration of God’s purposes for the earth and for transformation through climate change.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray

Creator God, from the tree of the garden of Eden, to the tree in the city of Revelation,
we thank you for your vision of creation healed.

Help us to be your agents of restoration, tending to the beauty of the earth,
and enabling your healing of the nations.

A Prayer of lament

O God, the heavens are not glad, the earth does not rejoice;
warming gasses fill the atmosphere, pollution turns clean air foul, climate breakdown wreaks havoc.

The sea roars with the grief of the plastic that fills it, of the destruction of the coral reef;
the fields exclaim despair for delayed rains and prolonged drought,
for species extinction on a daily basis.
No song of joy rings out from the trees of the forest decimated by forest fires.
How long, O God, how long until your justice comes for all your creatures and the earth.
In you we put our trust.

Prayer for transformation

‘I will give them a new heart and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh’.
Ezekiel 11:19

Our God, we pray for transformation of hardened hearts and closed minds,
resistant to the changes needed for sustainable and thriving futures for all of creation;
for stones of apathy and indifference to become hearts of concern and compassion,
for stones of self-preservation to become hearts of secure generosity;

for stones of fear of scarcity to become hearts of generous abundance;
for stones of judgement and shame to become hearts of mercy and grace;
for the stones of longing and consumerism to become hearts satisfied and in communion with your phenomenal creation.
Transform us by your Spirit, that we might be your people, and you, our God.
In your name, we pray.

Christian Aid week prayer *(by Bob Kikuyu, Global theology advisor, Christian Aid)*

Great God, who makes the sun to rise and opens the heavens;
Hear the cry of the people who sow in hope for rain but reap only despair.
Hear the cry of the people seeking shelter from the storm,
their hopes and homes submerged.
Hear the cry of the people when creation is hitting back, with rage and resistance;
Give us hope, grant us salvation, give us a new relationship with creation,
with reverence to tend this gift from you and say once again of the earth and all you created –
IT IS GOOD.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth, as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. Amen

Hymn What shall I do my God to love (Singing the Faith 436)

Sing/Read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYkvm03EnTA>

What shall I do my God to love,
my loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
the depth of sovereign grace?

Your sovereign grace to all extends,
immense and unconfined;
from age to age it never ends;
enfolds all humankind.

Throughout the world its breath is known,
wide as infinity;
so wide it never passed by one,
or it had passed by me.

My trespass was grown up to heaven;
but, far above the skies,
in Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see your mercies rise.

The depth of all-redeeming love
what angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
the gift unspeakable!

Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
possession of your own;
my longing heart vouchsafe to make
your everlasting throne.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Blessing

We go in the power of God who raised Jesus from death,
and in the mercy of God who has forgiven and healed us.

We go as witnesses to God's love,
carrying with us his gracious promise that that we do not go
alone.

Thanks be to God.