

This short act of worship has been produced for you by Revd Jonathan Dean.

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 and pray for them as they pray for you.

**Call to Worship: Psalm 100**

O shout to the Lord in triumph, all the earth:  
serve the Lord with gladness,  
and come before God's face with songs of joy.

**Know that the Lord is God:**

**it is God who has made us, and we belong to God;  
we are God's people and the sheep of the Lord's pasture.**

Come into the gates with thanksgiving,  
and into the courts with praise:  
give thanks to God! Bless God's holy name!

**For the Lord is good, and God's loving mercy is for ever:  
God's faithfulness throughout all generations.**

**Opening Hymn: Sing to him in whom creation (Singing the Faith 14)**

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fiYNEOFTfg>

Sing to him in whom creation  
found its shape and origin;  
Spirit, moving on the waters  
troubled by the God within;  
source of breath to all things breathing,  
life in whom all lives begin.

Sing to God, the close companion  
of our inmost thoughts and ways;  
who, in showing us his wonders,  
is himself the power to gaze,  
and his will, to those who listen,  
by a still small voice conveys.

Holy people, priests and prophets  
caught his accents, spoke his word;  
his the truth behind the wisdoms  
which as yet know not our Lord;  
he the love of God eternal,  
which in Christ was seen and heard.

Tell of how the ascended Jesus  
armed a people for his own;  
how a hundred men and women  
turned the known world upside down.  
to its dark and farthest corners  
by the wind of Whitsun blown.

Pray we, then, O Lord the Spirit,  
on our lives descend in might;  
let your flame break out within us,  
fire our hearts and clear our sight,  
till, white-hot in your possession,  
we, too, set the world alight.

Praise, O praise the Holy Spirit,  
praise the Father, praise the Word,  
source, and truth, and inspiration,  
Trinity in deep accord;  
through your voice which speaks within us  
we your creatures own you Lord.

Michael Hewlett (1916-2000)

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### Prayers

God of all life, God of goodness and grace and justice,  
We praise you for the world you have made:  
For its intricacy, variety and goodness,  
For its beauty and colour and majesty.  
From the smallest cell to the mightiest mountain, all is yours:  
created and nurtured and held in life by your power and  
tender care.

Jesus, son of Mary, child of Nazareth,  
We praise you for your re-creation of all that God has made:  
For your life, which shows us how to live;  
For your self-offering, which points us to ultimate meaning;  
For your resurrection, by which we are born to the new life of  
your Kingdom.  
We are your people, formed and held by your grace and  
power.

Holy Spirit of God, nurturer, empowerer, life-giver:  
You embolden us with prophetic energy not only to speak the  
Word of God,  
But to *be* the Word of God, in this time and this place.  
We praise you for your presence in our midst,  
And ask you to make and re-make us in these days of challenge  
and change,  
That we may now be the agents of Christ's risen life, in our  
communities, and in your world.

**Amen.**

### ***A Prayer of Confession (from the Iona Community)***

O God, you are always true to us in love  
And we are left wanting to say sorry  
For our faithlessness to you and to one another,  
For our forgetting of the poor and the broken,  
For our failure to cherish creation.

Give us life, O God, to change  
And enable us to change, that we may live.

**Amen.**

Spirit of truth and judgement,  
who alone can cast out  
the powers that grip our world  
at the point of crisis:

Give us your discernment,  
that we may accurately name what is evil,  
and know the way that leads to peace,  
through Jesus Christ.

**Amen.**

**First Reading: Amos 7: 7-15**

This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in his hand. And the Lord said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb-line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.' Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of

Israel, saying, 'Amos has conspired against you in the very centre of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. For thus Amos has said, "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land." '

And Amaziah said to Amos, 'O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.'

Then Amos answered Amaziah, 'I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, and the Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."

**Second Reading: Mark 6: 14-29**

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus' name had become known. Some were saying, 'John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.' But others said, 'It is Elijah.' And others said, 'It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.' But when Herod heard of it, he said, 'John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.' For Herod himself had sent men who arrested John, bound him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, because Herod had married her. For John had been telling Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your

brother's wife.' And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When he heard him, he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him. But an opportunity came when Herod on his birthday gave a banquet for his courtiers and officers and for the leaders of Galilee. When his daughter Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his guests; and the king said to the girl, 'Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.' And he solemnly swore to her, 'Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.' She went out and said to her mother, 'What should I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the baptizer.' Immediately she rushed back to the king and requested, 'I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.' The king was deeply grieved; yet out of regard for his oaths and for the guests, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent a soldier of the guard with orders to bring John's head. He went and beheaded him in the prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl. Then the girl gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb.

**Second Hymn: Show me how to stand for justice (Singing the Faith 713)**

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fiYNEOFTFg>

Show me how to stand for justice:  
how to work for what is right,  
how to challenge false assumptions,  
how to walk within the light.  
May I learn to share more freely  
in a world so full of greed,  
showing your immense compassion  
by the life I choose to lead.

Teach my heart to treasure mercy,  
whether given or received –  
for my need has not diminished  
since the day I first believed:  
let me seek no satisfaction  
boasting of what I have done,  
but rejoice that I am pardoned  
and accepted in your Son.

Gladly I embrace a lifestyle  
modelled on your living word,  
in humility submitting

to the truth which I have heard.  
Make me conscious of your presence  
every day in all I do:  
by your Spirit's gracious prompting  
may I learn to walk with you.

Martin Leckebusch (b.1962)

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### ***Reflection on the Readings***

I want to tell you about the most breath-taking building I've ever visited.

It's the Church of the Holy Wisdom, Hagia Sophia, in Istanbul. It was built 1500 years ago to be the religious epicentre of a great global power, the Byzantine Empire. It's a staggering piece of architecture and engineering. But there was a powerful statement at its heart, which was to say that here, in this place, God was revealed, in the might of the Empire and in the person of the Emperor.

Front and centre in Hagia Sophia there is an elaborate geometric design in the floor. This is the 'omphalon', the navel

of the world. On this spot, successive emperors were crowned in pomp and pageantry we can barely imagine. On this spot, the building says, earth and heaven meet. Here, all God's glory and power meet the worthy receptacle of an earthly ruler. Here, we see God in human form. If you go upstairs to examine the jaw-dropping murals and mosaics more closely, the same point is repeatedly made again, in case you missed it: emperors are shown in the company of Jesus, and it is very hard to tell which is which because they are dressed alike, look alike, behave alike. If you wanted to see God in the Byzantine Empire, if you wanted to see the equivalent of Jesus, God in human form, you looked to the Emperor.

It was one way of understanding how and where God shows up in the world. And, in the West, after the Emperor Constantine, the Roman Empire made very similar claims and represented them in some quite similar ways.

But our readings today rather suggest that the architects of those buildings – and of those empires – had not been reading the same Bible as us, if they read one at all. They make very different, and quite subversive, claims about the places in

which and the people through whom God, and God's invitation to life, appear in the world.

Those readings also take us very deep into some very murky areas of human affairs. They certainly show us people in whom we might expect to see something of God revealed: kings of Israel, and high priests of the Temple. They take us to a national crisis, and to a palace intrigue, to moral decline, and to extrajudicial murder and corruption which runs right through the centre of the nation and all its institutions. On one hand we have the prophet Amos, eight centuries before Jesus, fighting to help his people to find their way through a period of external threat and internal decay. On the other we have John the Baptist, who doesn't directly speak in our reading but nevertheless stands out against the backdrop of the sheer vileness of Herod's court, with its incest, greed, murderous hatred and vicious scheming: and who pays the ultimate price for the truth of his message and the insistence with which he proclaims it.

So, what do these readings say about how and where God appears, and makes a claim on us, on our lives, and on our world?

Firstly, I want us to notice God's rather radical efforts at something we hear a lot about nowadays: 'levelling up'. But it's far from a cynical, nebulous political slogan, in God's Kingdom. The people chosen to bear God's word, to speak and to embody God's message, are very humble. They are from marginal communities. They are simple, but possessed of huge insight and integrity. Unlike people who sit on thrones, they aren't the obvious channels of power or authority. And yet it's *to* those very people who sit on thrones that they're sent, even when those monarchs are supposedly anointed by God for their task.

The levelling up and down of God's reign is a dramatic reversal of the wisdom of earthly rulers and authorities. It's beautifully summarised in R. S. Thomas's poem, *The Kingdom*:

It's a long way off but inside it

There are quite different things going on:

Festivals at which the poor man

Is king and the consumptive is

Healed; mirrors in which the blind look

At themselves and love looks at them

Back; and industry is for mending

The bent bones and the minds fractured

By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Amos and John ask us, challenge us, to consider our own place in that levelled-up-and-down Kingdom, to lay to one side our own notions of our frailty or uselessness or weakness, and simply offer ourselves for whatever God needs from us, to whomever and whatever God will send us.

Secondly, our readings point to a pattern in the life of God's kingdom of justice, love and peace. Both Amos and John unflinchingly reveal what's hiding in plain sight. They courageously force those around them to face up to reality. They refuse to allow the deceptions and illusions of their age to continue unchallenged. Like the little boy in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, they insist upon stating what's obvious, if only those around them would see.

For Amos, it's a wealthy society absorbed in its own greed and hedonism, while the poor starve and the oppressed endure appalling injustice. A wealthy, self-satisfied society swiftly headed towards its own assured destruction, as enemy armies advance, and it refuses to face up to its own moral bankruptcy. He has this extraordinary image, of the plumb line, by which God forces the people to see how out of kilter they are, how crooked their common life has become, how twisted their shared values are, while they pat themselves on the back and congratulate themselves for their ingenuity, civilisation and brilliance. There's a [wonderful sculpture](#) inspired by it in Coventry Cathedral. Amos asks us all to imagine God's plumb line measuring our own cities and societies: how do *we* measure up, against the Kingdom's radical dimensions?

For John, there's a similar task, of challenging a very complacent nation, which is perfectly represented by its utterly debauched and preening royal court. Herod lives in moral squalor, while all the time his people are in a sordid compromise with the Roman Empire that corrodes their very life and purpose. At the centre of the nation's depravity and folly is Herod's own family and their misaligned relationships. Married to his sister-in-law, having murdered his brother to

have her, he is now drawn incestuously to his stepdaughter, whom the historian Josephus tell us was called Salomé. And everyone at court pretends this is all absolutely normal, just as everyone in general pretends that their national life is not unjust, and not ruled by greed, self-interest and the rapacious demands of a wealthy few.

In Oscar Wilde's one act play, *Salomé*, this aspect of the story is grotesquely apparent. John, imprisoned in a large cistern, and brought out only momentarily, is the only one who refuses to join in the general delusion. He alone calls out Herod's foolishness, Herodias's wickedness, Salomé's degeneracy, and the whole nation's utter depravity. Everyone else is caught up in the fawning, delusional atmosphere of the palace, seeing nothing as it is and failing to act with the urgency God requires. After his murder, but because of his witness, the whole system begins to collapse – it cannot carry on as it was, now that John, the strange, terrifying, prophet from the wilderness, has laid it bare. In his final words before the play ends, King Herod, convicted, says "Put out the torches! I will not look at things; I will not suffer things to look at me. Put out the torches! Hide the moon! Hide the stars!" And then, he orders Salomé's

murder, perhaps in a final desperate hope that he can cover his tracks completely.

In the mid 18<sup>th</sup>-century, something rather similar was going on in relation to slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. Politicians, businesspeople, the landed gentry and even the Church all agreed: the Britain could not do without it. Without this trade, this commerce, the economy would collapse. All claims to being a civilised and civilising world power would fall. The very fabric of society would be rent asunder. Life as they knew it would be over. There was simply no alternative to a slave trade, to the trafficking of living people from Africa to the Americas. And, in pursuit of this universally-acknowledged truth, all manner of wicked lies were told about slavery: it actually civilised African peoples. It was better than leaving them as they were. The cumulative benefits of the slave trade, *for both slaves and slavers*, far outweighed any inconvenience.

It's one of the proudest moments in early Methodism that, decades before Wilberforce or Newton, long before it was remotely fashionable or widely agreed upon, John Wesley took up his pen to expose this wicked lie, and to reveal slavery for what it was – an unconscionable evil and an indelible stain on

the character of any nation that claimed civilisation, let alone Christian religion, for itself. He was utterly alone in doing so, an Amos, or a John. Wesley described slavery as “this execrable sum of all villainies”. He called the death of slaves in transit or, overworked on plantations, what it was: murder. He revealed the untruths which were the foundations of slavery, about the differences between races, or the lesser worth of African cultures. And he rebuked those who said there was no sensible economic alternative:

“...better no trade, than trade produced by villainy. It is far better to have no wealth, than to gain wealth at the expense of virtue. Better is honest poverty, than all the riches bought by the tears, and sweat, and blood, of our fellow-creatures.”

Amos and John the Baptist – as well as John Wesley – challenge us, to ask what are those assumed, unchallenged, uncontested ways of living and working and doing business and carrying on in our society, here, now, which, when brought into the light of day, are unworthy of the life of God’s Kingdom and our calling as the followers of Jesus? How does the plumb line fall across our cities and neighbourhoods? And will we dare to say the unsayable? Will we risk being accused of being

“woke”, if we feel called to expose what is wrong, and unfair, and fundamentally unjust?

Finally, these readings pose a question for us about what truly lasts. Like all human imperial projects, the Byzantine Empire couldn’t in the end live up to its own publicity. It dwindled and declined, and shrank and diminished as successive enemies overran it, until the moment in 1453 when it finally disappeared, as the Ottomans overcame it, and Hagia Sophia ceased even to be a church, let alone the place where we might see God, disguised as a mighty Emperor.

Perhaps like me, you had to learn Shelley’s poem ‘Ozymandias’ in school, of the wreckage of the statue of a once-proud ruler, whose mighty Empire is now reduced to nothing in the desert sands. It’s a haunting image, and relevant to our readings today.

A century and a half after Shelley’s death, another poet, Philip Larkin, was visiting Chichester Cathedral and was struck by the [tomb of a 14<sup>th</sup> Century aristocratic couple](#). Amid all the power, pomp and flashy wealth of their resting-place, Larkin reflects, in a characteristically melancholy manner, on noticing that

when you look closely, you can see that they are surreptitiously holding hands. It moves him. And, remembering the demise of their earthly influence long ago, he wonders whether this tomb proves “our almost instinct almost true: what will survive of us is love.”

What God’s Kingdom suggests is that Larkin’s “almost instinct” is absolutely true. As earthly empires fall and human rulers fall into oblivion, the work of their lives utterly swept away by the tides of history, the work of God’s Kingdom endures. It is sometimes quiet work, done by obscure and marginal people; it is often work which is derided and mocked and rejected and despised in its own time, as it lays bare the uncomfortable truth and the hidden wickedness of how we choose to live; but it is never wasted or in vain. Nothing we do, offered in faith, “green as a leaf”, to God and to God’s world, is ever in vain, and it endures. I believe this is what Jesus, supremely, like all the prophets before him, has shown us.

The Methodist Church is just beginning a new project, “Walking with Micah”, named for one of Amos’s contemporaries, and asking us to think again about what it means to be a justice-seeking Church, and to see this as

absolutely central to our Gospel calling and our evangelistic witness. We are being asked, in the spirit of John Wesley and those early Methodists, to listen to what’s going on around us, to reflect deeply and prayerfully on it, and to explore, faithfully and passionately, what we may be called to do about it together. Let’s give this work our all, as our forebears did before us. Because none of us is too weak or small to make a difference; all of us must deepen our understanding of life as life is really lived in God’s world right now; and nothing we offer in faith, for God’s Kingdom, is ever wasted or in vain.

“For the Lord has said to me – and to you – ‘Go, prophesy to my people.’” **Amen.**

***A Time of Prayer (using Singing the Faith 719)***

We pray for peace,  
but not the easy peace  
built on complacency  
and not the truth of God.

We pray for real peace,  
the peace God’s love alone can seal.

*We pray for those we know enduring conflict, division, and unease...*

We pray for peace,  
but not the cruel peace  
leaving God's poor bereft  
and dying in distress;  
we pray for real peace,  
enriching all the human race.

*We pray for those in our world who suffer from poverty and marginalisation...*

We pray for peace,  
and not the evil peace  
defending unjust laws  
and nursing prejudice,  
but for the real peace  
of justice, mercy, truth and love.

*We pray for all who endure prejudice and injustice, asking for change...*

We pray for peace:  
holy communion  
with Christ our risen Lord

and every living thing;  
God's will fulfilled on earth  
and all his creatures reconciled.

*We pray for the conflicted parts of our world, and for all people longing for reconciliation...*

We pray for peace,  
and for the sake of peace,  
look to the risen Christ  
who gives the grace we need,  
to serve the cause of peace  
and make our own self-sacrifice.

*We pray for ourselves, asking for wisdom about how to act for justice in God's world...*

God, give us peace:  
if you withdraw your love,  
there is no peace for us  
nor any hope of it.  
With you to lead us on,  
through death or tumult, peace will come.  
**Amen.**

***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.

Lead us not into temptation

but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power,

and the glory are yours

now and for ever.

**Amen.**

***Closing Hymn Send down the fire of your justice (Singing the Faith 413)***

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2cSkI0IiioM>

*Send down the fire of your justice,  
send down the rains of your love;  
come send down the Spirit,  
breathe life in your people,  
and we shall be people of God.*

Call us to be your compassion,  
teach us the song of your love;  
give us hearts that sing,  
give us deeds that rings,  
make us ring with the sound of your love.

Call us to learn of your mercy,  
teach us the way of your peace;  
give us hearts that feel,  
give us hands that heal,  
make us walk in the way of your peace.

Call us to answer oppression,  
teach us the fire of your truth;  
give us righteous souls,  
till your justice rolls,  
make us burn with the fire of your truth.

Call us to witness your kingdom,  
give us the presence of Christ;  
may your holy light  
keep us shining bright,  
ever shine with the presence of Christ.

Marty Haughen (b.1950)

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***Closing Responses and Blessing***

God, lead us, that we may stand firm in faith for justice.

**Teach us love. Teach us compassion.**

**Above all, out of love and compassion,**

**Teach us to act. Amen.**

And the blessing of God, who makes us, re-makes us in Christ,  
and sustains by the Holy Spirit, be with us all, now and for ever.

**Amen.**

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