



Sixth Sunday of Easter

Morning Prayer

Dispersed community prayer at 10:30am

(But God will hear our prayers anytime!)

*You are invited to guard time for us to be together, united in prayer in one faith,
to our one Lord*

You may wish to prepare by lighting a candle

◆ denotes an optional pause to keep silence and meditate on the words

🔊 Denotes optional audio / video version from the church website:

<https://widcombe.church/our-churches/church-life/church-online/>

Preparation

O Lord, open our lips
and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.
In your resurrection, O Christ,
let heaven and earth rejoice. Alleluia.

Give thanks and praise God

Blessed are you, Lord God of our salvation,
to you be praise and glory for ever.
As once you ransomed your people from Egypt
and led them to freedom in the promised land,
so now you have delivered us from the dominion of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your risen Son.
May we, the first fruits of your new creation,
rejoice in this new day you have made,
and praise you for your mighty acts.
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Blessed be God for ever.

The night has passed, and the day lies open before us;
let us pray with one heart and mind.

◆

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day,
so may the light of your presence, O God,
set our hearts on fire with love for you;
now and for ever. Amen.

Psalm 66

Praise for God's Goodness to His people

- ¹ Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
² sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.
- ³ Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
- ⁴ All the earth worships you;
they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name.' ♦ *Selah*
- ⁵ Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.
- ⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in him,
⁷ who rules by his might for ever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations—
let the rebellious not exalt themselves. ♦ *Selah*
- ⁸ Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
⁹ who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
- ¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
- ¹¹ You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
¹² you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.
- ¹³ I will come into your house with burnt-offerings;
I will pay you my vows,
¹⁴ those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
- ¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt-offerings of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. ♦ *Selah*
- ¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.
- ¹⁷ I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.
- ¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
- ¹⁹ But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.
- ²⁰ Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

*Glory to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning is now
and shall be for ever. Amen.*

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.

The Word of God

New Testament reading: Acts 17: 22-31

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

New Testament reading: John 14: 15-21

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

"If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them."

Reflection

It's funny what you miss, when you can't have it, isn't it?

Some people are apparently missing their daily commute, even though it was on packed public transport. They are discovering that they miss that space to read, to think, to switch into work mode. And at the end of the day, they miss the space to disconnect from work, to wind down, to switch off.

Children are surprised to find themselves missing school, time with friends, teachers, doing things, learning things, playing games, being properly hungry when they get home.

Many people, particularly those living alone, miss touch, a handshake, a comforting hug, a kiss on the cheek or the lips. We need physical contact with each other.

Even those of us who have been locked down with people we love are missing others whom we can now only see on a screen: parents, grown-up children, friends, colleagues. We miss playing football with the team more than we miss the ball!

And I think we are all missing any sense of certainty – from whether Polly and Sam can get married this summer, to whether there will still be a job for us when this is all over, if it ever is all over.

A protected space, friends, comfort, companionship, security – this is what we find we miss...

And it's funny what you notice when you have time to look about you, isn't it?

Paul is in Athens, without his friends, unable to do what he usually does in a new town, which is go straight to the synagogue and start teaching. Just like how in lockdown we spotted interesting hidden corners near where we live which we'd never noticed before, Paul has time to gaze about him and spots the unexpected, an altar to, "an unknown God."

Now the Greeks were really good at religion – they had lots of gods and lots of temples and you could pick the one (or more) you liked and worship the way you liked. But they still had a sneaking suspicion they might not have got everything covered – there was a gap, a need, a sense that something was missing. They couldn't see the true God, they didn't know the true God, but they felt his absence. Hence this altar – just in case there was more to life.

Jesus is talking about the same sense of missing something to his disciples. They were all Jews and the Jews knew the true God and they were good at religion too, although you had to worship the way the Pharisees liked to make the grade. But, like the Greeks, the Jews knew they were missing something. They were waiting for the Messiah to come, to fulfil all God's promises to his people. But some of them were so busy concentrating on their religion, they missed the Messiah when he did come. They just saw Jesus who defied their

expectations. They didn't recognize their own God, the God of love, because they were so focused on following God's law.

But there were some who, when they took time to gaze upon him, realized the Messiah, their Saviour, was right there in front of their eyes.

It's funny what you miss when you're in a hurry, isn't it?

The disciples are in a hurry during the Last Supper. They fire questions at Jesus: why are you washing my feet? Why don't you wash all of me? Who's going to betray you? Where are you going? Why can't I follow you? How can we get where you're going? Why don't other people know who you are? Show us the Father!

But, just as John slows down the pace of his story to share Jesus' words in detail, we need to slow down our reading. We often pass quickly through from the words of comfort we heard last week, "In my Father's house there are many rooms," to the, "I am the true vine..." passage coming up. But slowing down to focus on just these six verses, I ended up focusing on just one, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever."

And I rediscovered what I think I knew before but had somehow stopped appreciating in my race through life, this word, advocate.

The concept can't be fully conveyed by a single word, although advocate is an excellent word. The idea is of someone who is called in to come alongside someone else. The Athenians Paul was talking to might have used it to describe someone who represented a defendant in a serious case, or a witness for the defence, or an expert brought in to give counsel in a tricky situation. It could also mean someone who was called in to encourage soldiers who were losing heart, to bring them courage to return to the battle – which was the meaning of the word "comforter" in the fourteenth century when the Bible was first translated into English.

And it's funny what you notice when you slow right down...

Because there's another word here we need to notice. I should say, we need to notice the word "another" here.

Jesus says his Father will send, "another advocate," which begs the question, who is the first? Well, this word comes in just one other place, other than during the Last Supper. In John's first letter, he writes, "we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ... the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not just for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Jesus is the first advocate, first comforter, first defender, companion, counsellor, friend, helper, intercessor. He tells the disciples that he has to leave them to be with his Father but his Father is going to send another like himself, who is equally God, equally for us, equally love but who, not being human, can be with each of us all the time, who actually lives in us, giving us spiritual life and breath, just as God the Father gave all things life and breath in creation.

Wow! Let's pause for a moment to take that in...

This wonderful Saviour, defender, counsellor, companion, comforter and friend is available for you and me. He wants to be with us, in us, forever. Unaffected by whether we have to stay at home or go to work, unaffected by crashing economies, he is constant and unfailing. We don't need FaceTime or Zoom to see him or to go through quarantine before we are allowed to be with him. We can be utterly secure in him because he lives in us.

But how?

Jesus tells us: we just have to love and obey him. What obeying Jesus looks like is a whole other sermon. Suffice to say today, it means live a life of love.

All we have to do is make that choice to love Jesus and Jesus promises the Spirit lives in us.

What amazing grace!

Now there may be some of us who say that we love Jesus but don't feel like the Spirit is living in us. The person next to us in the pew seems to be much more Spirit-filled, more holy, more sorted, happier than us.

Well, actually, living a Spirit-filled life is simply believing that God is living in you, irrespective of your feelings, your day-to-day sense of God-in-you. After all, when Jesus sees Thomas after the resurrection, he tells him to believe, not to cheer up.

So practise believing! Protect a little of your time each day so that you can turn to God. Lay down your worries and acknowledge his presence. Tell him you love him. Ask him to abide in you and to help you abide in him. Ask him to fill you with his life. Do it for a minute at the start of your daily exercise or your commute. If you can't get out, find an egg timer and give yourself a whole 3 minutes. If you are an App sort of person, download the Pause App from Ransomed Heart to your phone and give it a try. But whatever you do, practise. Practice makes perfect!

Isn't it incredible what we can have, when we love Jesus?

Hymn

Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear
And Grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

Through many dangers, toils, and snares
I have already come.
'Tis Grace hath brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me.
His Word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail
And mortal life shall cease
I shall possess, within the veil
A life of joy and peace

When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.

Intercessions

O LORD we come to you, not trusting in our own righteousness but in what the Lord Jesus has done on the cross, we come trusting in His blood, trusting in your Holy Name, your Holy Word and your Holy Spirit.

O LORD, we come to you as your children, mindful of our role and responsibility to pray at this time, as it says in Esther 4:14 we will not remain silent at this time for who knows but that we have come to our position of faith 'for such a time as this'.

O LORD, as we come to you to pray for healing for your world, we are reminded of what you say in 2 Chronicles 7:14: 'if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from what is wrong, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.'

So LORD, we come to you as 'your people, called by your name'. Thank you that we bear the name of Christ.

LORD, we come to you to 'humble ourselves', we say we chose to put you and your ways and your Word first in our lives.

LORD, we come to you to pray, to pray for healing and blessing for our world LORD, for our land. We pray for your blessing on the NHS and all brave key workers. We pray for your blessing for our Queen and heavenly wisdom all those in Government and in authority in all spheres of life, including those who are working so hard to find a COVID-19 vaccine. LORD we pray for your blessing on your Church and for all Christian Leaders. LORD we pray for your blessing on Tim, Jenny and Judith. We pray for your provision and peace for the many people who are anxious financially. We pray for physical health, mental health, spiritual health, social health LORD around the world. We pray for your blessing and your presence in all homes and families around the world, in our land, in our city as we all learn to live and work differently.

LORD we declare our complete dependence on you LORD and our belief in your Power and Wisdom.

LORD, we come to you to 'seek your face'. We TURN TO YOU in a new determination to seek you LORD even as Esther sought the face of her king. LORD we seek your healing for our world. LORD we know that those who seek you WILL find you.

Lord, we come to you to 'turn from what is wrong'. LORD as we turn to you, we turn away from any ways in our lives that is not in line with your Word and ways of love.

Thank you LORD, that as we come to you, you promise you 'will hear from heaven', you 'will forgive' and you 'will heal' the land.

So LORD, we pray for your Kingdom to come, your will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen

The Collect

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Rejoicing in God's new creation, as our Saviour taught us, so we pray

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.

To Conclude

May the risen Christ grant us the joys of eternal life.
Amen.

Let us bless the Lord. Alleluia, alleluia.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia, alleluia.

