**Dorset South and West Circuit**

**Service for Sunday 25 October 2020 by Revd Gwyneth Owen**

**Bible readings**

Psalm 1

Matthew 22:34-46

Centre yourself in God’s presence in whatever way works best for you – a lit candle, a time of silence or, maybe, breathing in “be” and out “still”.

When you’re ready, I invite you to say the following service out loud and slowly, letting the words sink deep into your being. Don’t rush from one section to the other – take time.

**Hymn**

The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want; He makes me lie in pastures green.  
He leads me by the still, still waters, His goodness restores my soul.

*And I will trust in You alone, and I will trust in You alone,  
For Your endless mercy follows me, your goodness will lead me home.*

He guides my ways in righteousness, and He anoints my head with oil,  
And my cup, it overflows with joy, I feast on His pure delights.

*Chorus*

And though I walk the darkest path, I will not fear the evil one,  
For You are with me, and Your rod and staff are the comfort I need to know.

*Chorus*

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**Let us pray,**

Gracious God, ever present in our green pastures, still waters, overflowing joy and darkest paths we lean into your presence and reach out for the comfort of your reliable holding of us. PAUSE

As you hold us in the eternal sphere of your loving kindness so we have the confidence, once more, to savour your Being and your constant desire for us to know you and to place you at the centre of our lives. PAUSE

We praise you for your welcome and joyfulness when we meet with you -as we are doing now. PAUSE

Gracious God, why don’t we make time to do this more often? Forgive us, we pray, for we so easily forget you, your reliable holding of us, your constant desire for us to know you and your joy when we intentionally place ourselves in your presence. It is such a relief for us to reflect on the ministry of Jesus and to hear his words to us: your sins are forgiven. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your grace and your forgiveness.

By the mysterious workings of your Spirit in our lives may we know your presence in this moment and feel your presence in the depth of our being. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

**Reading Psalm 1**

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;  
but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
 and on his law they meditate day and night.  
They are like trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.   
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.  
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,

but the way of the wicked will perish.

**Reading Matthew 22:34-40**

**34**When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35**and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36**“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37**He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38**This is the greatest and first commandment. **39**And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ **40**On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

**Reflection**

I’m writing this the day after our Prime Minister, and others, have told us about the 3-tier system now in place to try and contain the spread of COVID-19. Implementing the 3-tier alert levels is a choice taken by the government. It is by no means universally accepted, with some its own chief advisors demanding a more complete lock-down and other local officials demanding less of a lock down. The government, between the rock of economic disaster/human hardship and the hard place of people’s health/survival of the NHS, has made a choice as to how we should proceed. Is it a good choice or a bad choice? We don’t know yet, but time will tell. It is certainly not an easy choice, make no mistake. It is a nuanced choice with equally competing claims to be taken into account.

The writer of Psalm 1 sets his stall out for his readers regarding the choices before them in a very clear way : there is the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. The former will be happy whilst the latter will perish. The Good Choice versus the Bad Choice couldn’t be more stark. So, what makes for happiness according to this first Psalm in the Psalter? What’s the Good Choice? Well, it’s delighting in the law of the Lord. The Psalmist exhorts his readers to meditate on God’s law day and night in order that they might flourish like well-rooted trees by the running streams.

What do you reckon God’s law is, then? Is it a never-ending list of do’s and don’ts? The 10 commandments, maybe? Phew, I don’t fancy meditating on rule books 24/7!! Fortunately, I don’t think that’s what the Psalmist is talking about. “Law” means God’s teachings, God’s invitation to a way of life brought to us by the prophets and other leaders who honoured God. **“Law” means God’s idea for how human beings might live in order for all to flourish.** Ah, now that sounds a better prospect to meditate on, don’t you think?

To be fair, there were those who tried to make God’s laws so complex and tricky that people wearied of ever keeping the ”Law”. Jesus, in today’s passage from Matthew, quotes a brilliant, easy to remember summary from the Old Testament of what “Law” is all about: it’s about loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbour as ourselves.

So, dear reader, there’s the choice before us. Do we choose to delight in loving God and our neighbour as ourselves , or do we not? The Psalmist holds a reality check before us if we choose a different path, if we make a Bad Choice. He says that without loving God and our neighbour as ourselves, we will be impoverished, unreliable, unsteady, flimsy, unrooted- like chaff blowing in the wind. In short, we will perish. We are not designed to write God out of the equation of our life, and we do so at our peril, says the Psalmist.

But what does it look like in your life and mine to love God and our neighbour as ourselves? I think it’s important to remember that for the Psalmist and for Jesus, individual piety was simply not at the centre of their agenda. They were interested in communities. Individuals whose lives are centred on God build better communities –the kind of community Jesus called the kingdom of God. The individualism that can be so rife in our society today would have been very foreign to the Bible writers and to Jesus. I think COVID-19 has made our society recapture something of the communal aspect of the Biblical story. For example, why do you wear a mask? Of course, it is to protect me- thank you! Why do I wear a mask – I do it to protect you. Why did we applaud NHS workers on a Thursday evening and why are we so much more alert at the moment as to what others do for our good? Isn’t it because we realize that we need each other to behave in certain ways in this pandemic in order to promote the larger good to the benefit of as many people as possible. We are realizing again that no person is an island – we are connected.

It is that connectedness with each other and with God that is at the heart of the law of the Lord upon which we are invited to meditate and to base our lives. And remember, **“Law” means God’s idea for how human beings might live in order for all to flourish.**

If I had to say what has been central to my understanding of my vocation over all these years, it is to be deepened in my thinking and understanding – theologically, spiritually, pastorally, and to encourage others to be deepened in their thinking and understanding, too, so that we can be a better version of ourselves, so that we can flourish and build the communities for which God longs. Isn’t that God’s idea for us? To grow into the likeness of Christ in ways that help us and our neighbours to flourish- like those trees planted by streams of water?

My invitation to you as you read this is to ask yourself, “in what ways does my life reflect the truth that I love God and love my neighbour as myself”?

PAUSE

My second invitation is to ask you what you can do this week to focus more intentionally on loving God and your neighbour as yourself?

PAUSE

The government is making choices on our behalf about life and death within the COVID-19 pandemic. These Bible passages today put a different choice before us: it’s not only about life and death, it’s about merely surviving or LIVING with God at the centre of all things. Let’s help each other, daily, to make a Good Choice. Amen

**Prayers for others**

Gracious God, you come to us in love and you invite us to love. We pray in your love for those in need, remembering that they are our neighbours. We pray for,

* Our politicians – may they know your wisdom. PAUSE
* All who work in the NHS, especially those who put themselves at risk for others – may they know your strength and courage. PAUSE
* Those who feel isolated – may they know your friendship. PAUSE
* Those whose lives have hit rock-bottom – may they know your hope. PAUSE
* Our own church and community – may we help each other flourish. PAUSE
* Ourselves – by the power of your Spirit, may we continue to grow into the likeness of Christ. PAUSE.

Where we are part of the answer to our prayers, give us generous hearts to respond. We ask these prayers in the name of Christ who taught us to pray saying, **Our Father…….**

**Hymn**

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 that 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.

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May God’s blessing of Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us now and remain with us always. Amen.

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