

**Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 21 March 2021 –  
'Am I a failure?' - by Revd David Cuckson**

**PASSION**

**SUNDAY**



**Opening Sentences**

‘Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit’ (*Psalm 51:10-12*)

**HYMN Singing the Faith 244** (*John Keble / William John Hall*)

1. Blest are the pure in heart,  
for they shall see our God;  
the secret of the Lord is theirs;  
their soul is Christ’s abode.

3. Still to the lowly soul  
he does himself impart,  
and for his dwelling and his throne  
chooses the pure in heart.

2. The Lord, who left the heavens  
our life and peace to bring,  
to dwell on earth in lowliness,  
our pattern and our King.

4. Lord, we your presence seek,  
a vision of your face;  
give us a pure and lowly heart,  
a temple of your grace.

**Prayer**

God our Father, life pulls us in many directions, and presents many possibilities. Sometimes we do not know which way to turn. There are so many claims upon our time, so many demands for our attention, that the very range of choices before us can drive us to distraction.

It is then that we need you. Yours is the ultimate claim on our lived; help us to listen for it in all the other claims that are made on us. Because we cannot do everything, help us to get our priorities right, to know what you want us to do now, and what we have to leave.

May the stress and strain of life not break us, but make us stronger, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

And as we turn our thoughts to words of Scripture, we pray for understanding what has been done for our redemption, so that Christ may live in our hearts by faith, and be proclaimed in our lives by love. Amen.

**John 12:20-31 (NRSVA)**

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Berhsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

'Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.' The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.'

## Reflection

When I want some help in reading a passage from John's Gospel, one of the first places I turn is to my copy of William Temple's *Readings in St John's Gospel*. I bought it second hand as a student in Cambridge, and it was signed at the front by the person who was presumably the first owner of the book, clearly purchased when it had just been published. And I guess it must have been he who marked the book with marginal lines and underlinings, as well as some marginal notes. And it was one of those notes, in relation to the passage which forms today's Gospel reading, which I have taken as the starting point for our reflections today. He wrote first: 'Am I a failure?'

This is a question that, I guess, we all ask from time to time. Who on earth has succeeded in everything that they attempt? From our earliest efforts as children to learn the most basic tasks, from losing out to a rival in the classroom or on the sports field, from a job opportunity missed, from a friendship broken, we all have regrets of some sort. And when we come to pray we include a prayer of confession, because we want to acknowledge that we have not met the standards of conduct to which we aspire.

But here in this passage from John's Gospel we are concerned with something more fundamental. As Jesus comes to face up to the inevitability of his condemnation and death, a prayer comes to mind, 'Father, save me from this hour'. John does not record the image of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, but he does not need to because that moment of crisis and decision is here. Was this course on which he was now set the right one? Had there been a better way to proclaim and bring in God's kingdom? What about the call from some in the crowd and even among his close followers that he should lead an armed revolt to throw out the Roman authorities and to unseat the local potentates that relied on the Romans for their power? Or perhaps he should give up thoughts of going to Jerusalem for the time being and instead withdraw into a quiet backwater to spend more time teaching his followers about the ways of the kingdom of heaven? Were there enough of his followers to carry on his mission, were they up to the challenge, or would he be letting them down if he carried on now on his route to certain death? Was Jesus a failure?

It is interesting that John begins this part of his Gospel narrative with some Greeks coming to Philip. This immediately makes us think of the breadth of Jesus' mission – is it universal, extending even to the Greeks, or is it limited to the Jews? But John may also have had another point in mind. William Temple spells this out in his commentary on this passage. What Jesus was contemplating was not something that any normal Greek would have done. As William Temple put it, 'There is in all Greek thought no appreciation of the excellence of self-sacrifice. It might be necessary, and then

those who were capable of it were praiseworthy.... But its moral value was not perceived, and no Greek ever dared to say that love is the best thing in life, and that accordingly sacrifice, whereby love at once expresses itself and strengthens itself is the best form of action.'

'Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.' William Temple comments further on these words of Jesus: 'Self-love is self-destruction; self-centredness is sin, and self-love is hell. It is a condition that is bound to be miserable. The soul feeds on itself and so devours itself.' But the contrast is in Jesus himself. He turns his back on his doubts and commits himself to the way ahead, the way that will lead to the Cross. He is giving the supreme example in his actions of the words that he proclaims.

The person who wrote in the margin of my copy of William Temple's book, 'Am I a failure?' actually did not stop there but continued with the words, '/am I true to God's will and guidance in this and this situation?' The Cross for Jesus was the way of sealing his victory. To die as he did was to conquer hate and for love to triumph. This was God's will, the way of God's glory. There is nothing better in this life than to be true to God's will and guidance. Here there was confirmation for the people in the crowd – 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine'. Where Jesus has gone, we can follow, through all the trials and temptations that we may encounter, through all the doubts that may assail us from time to time, to find God's will and guidance for us today and for each day for the rest of our lives.

## **Prayer**

Father, what happens to us is a great test of character, and our trials leave us the worse or the better, depending on how we react to them. We thank you for Jesus: he was made perfect through sufferings. Help us, too, to use our trials and sufferings positively, to face difficult situations and to make the best of them. We know that we have, too often, fallen short of being the kind of people we would like to be, which we believe we are called to be, but trust in the power of forgiveness that we can still move forward, following, through trials and temptations, through doubts, to find your will and guidance for us today.

In our prayers for others, let us think especially of those who are currently in situations of stress and strain. Under each heading please take the opportunity to fill out with particular concerns that come to you.

Let us pray for those suddenly thrust into a new situation and having to adapt themselves to a new life, who need to find their bearings again....

Let us pray for those who feel their lives are spent in a backwater unrecognized and unacknowledged, who need to see how their faithfulness has its part in God's plan....

Let us pray for those with work problems, perhaps stuck with a job they long to change, or made redundant, who need courage to face the future....

Let us pray for those who are under great pressure, overworked, with heavy work or family responsibilities, who need strength to see them through....

Let us pray for our friends and families, especially any in particular need of support at this time....

And a prayer for ourselves, first giving thanks for all the people in the past who have come through hard experiences and proved their faith and who have pointed the way forward for us, and then for help to persevere to the end, and to use our trials positively and creatively to the glory of God.

And let us offer all these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

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 Singing the Faith 289** (*John Reynell Wreford*)

1. When my love for Christ grows weak,  
when for deeper faith I seek,  
then in thought I go to thee,  
Garden of Gethsemane.

2. There I walk amid the shades,  
while the lingering twilight fades,  
see that suffering, friendless One,  
weeping, praying there alone.

3. When my will to love grows weak,  
when for stronger faith I seek,  
hill of Calvary I go  
to your scenes of fear and woe;

4. There behold his agony,  
suffered on the bitter tree;  
see his anguish, see his faith,  
love triumphant still in death.

5. Then to life I turn again,  
learning all the worth of pain,  
learning all the might that lies  
in a full self-sacrifice.

6. And I praise with firmer faith  
Christ who vanquished pain and death;  
and to Christ enthroned above  
raise my song of selfless love.

**The Blessing**

As we seek to follow Christ and to serve him we do so in the confidence that the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with us and those we love throughout the coming days. Amen.

*[Prayers taken and adapted from 'More Contemporary Prayers' published by SCM Press Ltd]*