

Circuit Service – 4th Sunday in Lent
14th March 2021

Welcome

By God's grace we are God's children. As God's children either on our own or in the presence of others we join to worship our extraordinary God. There is a theme 'Let there be lights in the sky', but worship is not driven by a theme, rather it is a place of encounter with God. It is a place where the reality of our lives meets the reality of God. My prayer in preparing this service is that you will meet with God and know God's word to you.

Our opening hymn contains a good number of hallelujahs. It has already been commented on that some traditions don't encourage the singing of hallelujahs until Easter. It is a liturgical Lenten fast! I confess to being with St Francis. One can't reflect on God's creation and not want to sing 'hallelujah'

Hymn StF 99 H&P 329 'All creatures of our God and King'

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| <p>1 All creatures of our God and King,
lift up your voice and with us sing,
alleluia, alleluia !
O burning sun with golden beam,
and silver moon with softer gleam :
<i>O praise him, O praise him,
alleluia, alleluia, alleluia !</i></p> <p>2 O rushing wind that is so strong,
and clouds that sail in heaven along,
O praise him, alleluia !
O rising morn, in praise rejoice ;
and lights of evening, find a voice :</p> <p>3 O flowing water, pure and clear,
make music for your Lord to hear,
sing 'Praise him, alleluia !'
O fire, so masterful and bright,
giving to all both warmth and light :</p> <p>4 Dear mother earth, who day by day
unfolds rich blessings on our way,
O praise him, alleluia !
The flowers and fruits that bloom and grow,
let them his glory also show :</p> | <p>5 And all who are of tender heart
forgiving others, take your part,
sing, 'Praise him, alleluia !'
All who long pain and sorrow bear,
praise God, and on him cast your care :</p> <p>6 And now, most kind and gentle death,
waiting to hush our fading breath,
O praise him, alleluia !
You homeward lead the child of God,
and Christ the Lord the way has trod :</p> <p>7 Let all things their creator bless,
and worship him in humbleness ;
O praise him, alleluia !
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
and praise the Spirit, Three in One :</p> |
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St Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)
translated William Henry Draper (1855–1933) (*alt.*)

Prayer

Creating, redeeming, and sustaining God we praise you that like a mother,
you have birthed creation into being,
that you nurture it
and long for it to fulfil its potential.

We praise you for your love which has infused your creation from its very inception.
We praise you that your brooding Spirit continues to create and bring order out of chaos.
Amazing God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

we marvel at the ecosystems and galaxies you have made,
at the diversity of plant and animal life you have created,
at the beauty and interconnectedness of the universe of which we are a part.

We rejoice that in Christ you have given of yourself to the whole world. That in Christ we and all things are reconciled to him.

We ask you to be at the heart of our worship. We ask you to speak your word to us. Open us up to the movement of your Spirit. In Christ's great name we pray. Amen

Craft (optional) – Card making *There is a video to accompany this, but no text or instructions.*

Reading Genesis 1 v 14 – 19

[Hymn StF 107 H&P 334 'I sing the almighty power of God'](#)

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| 1 I sing the almighty power of God,
that made the mountains rise,
that spread the flowing seas abroad,
and built the lofty skies. | 4 Lord, how your wonders are displayed
where'er I turn mine eye,
if I survey the ground I tread,
or gaze upon the sky ! |
| 2 I sing the wisdom that ordained
the sun to rule the day ;
the moon shines full at his command,
and all the stars obey. | 5 God's hand is my perpetual guard,
he guides me with his eye ;
why should I then forget the Lord,
whose love is ever nigh ? |
| 3 I sing the goodness of the Lord,
that filled the earth with food ;
he formed the creatures with his word,
and then pronounced them good. | Isaac Watts (1674–1748) |

Today we are reflecting on Day 4 of the creation story which begins in chapter 1 of Genesis. The first 3 days, according to Ruth Valerio's book, are days about separation – light from darkness, water above from water below, land from water. Days 4, 5 & 6 involve filling the gaps so to speak. Today we consider the creation of the greater light which we call sun, the lesser light which we call moon and the stars.

'Wonder'

The first response surely is wonder. To stop for a moment and look, even if that looking is in our imagination. To be awestruck at this aspect of God's creation. To allow our minds to be blown away by the size, the enormity and the beauty of the universe. All the other days are earth bound. Most of creation based prayers are earth bound. Today we lift our eyes up and stretch our minds to take in what we can of this extraordinary universe that God has created.

As a family we used to holiday in a remote converted Methodist chapel on the border between the Yorkshire Dales and Cumbria. We loved going out at night when there were no clouds. I don't know how He did it, but God laid out more stars for us to see than we could see at home. The sky was full of them. Some of you will have been to places where there is even less artificial lighting cancelling out the stars. You will have seen even more stars and had your breath taken away. The writers of Genesis would have seen a sky like that.

I'm a visual person. Some of you will be numbers people and find those what thrill you. Listen to this:

*'The world we inhabit is one planet within a solar system within a galaxy within a universe. Our sun is just one of between 200 billion and 400 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, and earth is just one of at least 100 billion planets And that is just one galaxy out of possibly two trillion galaxies!'
..... if you imagine the sun to be the size of a peanut then the earth would be a grain of salt on its surface. To represent the distance to the nearest star, another peanut would need to be taken 200 miles away.' P89*

Do yourself a favour – on the next cloudless night, wrap up warm and go and look out. Enjoy the moon if there is one, marvel at the stars. Remember the light entering your eyes may have left that star hundreds of years ago. Picture the millions of stars just beyond your eyesight's reach and recite:

*'When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars which you have set in place,
what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?' Psalm 8 v 3,4*

- 1 In the beginning God played with the planets,
set them a-spinning in time and in space,
stars in the night sky, while sun lit the daytime,
blue was the globe that was formed for our race.
- 2 God saw the seas and the fish that swam in them,
formed the dry land where the trees soon would
grow,
animals now could inhabit the countries
warmed by the oceans or covered in snow.
- 3 After the animals, people were coming,
made in God's likeness to live on the earth ;
big the blue planet God gave them to live on,
sharing its riches, its wonder and worth.

Andrew Pratt (*b.* 1948)

'Rhythm'

We need to keep reminding ourselves this is a theological document. It is a profound and sophisticated theological document. It is carefully written. It is written within a specific context conscious of other thinking in surrounding cultures and beliefs. Some of the theological points are more obvious. So, you will have noticed neither the sun nor the moon are named. Why is that?

Others are less obvious:

We read 'And God said ..' and move on because it's so familiar to us. In the surrounding cultures and beliefs things were created following conflict or sex between deities. Not so here. There is one God and God is the creator. He speaks and it is made. His word is sufficient.

The surrounding cultures and beliefs put great store on the stars. The stars represented and were ruled by deities who were thought to control human destinies. Difficult to believe, I know. By the way what is your star sign? Here heavenly bodies are part of the created order. They are not divine. They are subject, as human beings are to the will of God.

They have a purpose though according to Genesis. They are there 'to mark seasons and days and years.' Each new month is the Jewish calendar begins when the moon is just a thin crescent. The full moon falls in the middle of the month. Our date for Easter and there by Ascension Day and Pentecost are calculated on the phases of the moon. Easter Sunday is the Sunday following the paschal moon, which is the full moon which falls on or after the Spring Equinox. There is a rhythm to the church's year – Advent, Christmas, lent, holy week and Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and harvest/creationtide.

There is a rhythm to the natural world too. A rhythm which many of us are less in touch with than our forebears. A quiz:

When are the following in flower?

- a. Snowdrops
- b. Rhododendron
- c. Horsechestnut candles
- d. Hawthorn hedges

When are the following in season in Britain

- a. Swedes
- b. Strawberries
- c. Tomatoes

During lockdown my wife and I have walked almost every day and usually at night. We have cherished the waxing and waning of the moon. We have loved the trees' skeletal silhouette against the night sky. We are looking forward once again to the buds slowly opening to reveal a covering of fresh green leaves. We are relishing the early blossom of blackthorn. These sights have been a gift. It is a gift available to most of us.

Prayer

Loving God, we seek your forgiveness for the lives that we lead that distance us from the rhythm you have built into your creation. We seek your forgiveness that our greed and thoughtlessness has led to some of those natural rhythms being disturbed to the detriment of your creation. Enable us with your wisdom to come to our senses and reconnect with the life giving, health restoring rhythms you have given. Lead us by your Spirit we pray. Amen

'End Times'

Ruth Valerio reminds us in her book that the heavenly bodies – sun, moon, sky and stars are often associated with great events such as the birth and death of Jesus. However, the predominant links are to judgement, the End times, the Day of the Lord. The prophet Joel (2 v 28 – 32) quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2 v 17- 21) in speaking of the last days says:

v 19 'I will show wonders in the heavens above.'

v 20 'The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood ..'

The prophet Isaiah (13 v 10 & 34 v 4) which Jesus uses in Mark 13, to describe the signs of the end of the age:

Mark 13 v 24:

'the sun will be darkened, the moon will not give its light;

the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.'

Wow. It sounds absolutely scary to me. How are we to read such disturbing language? It is apocalyptic. I understand apocalyptic language to be poetic and evocative. We sometimes say, 'my world has just collapsed'. It is a statement to be taken seriously but not literally. Apocalyptic language poetically is describing events of great significance. How does one do that when the events are beyond words beyond experience? This where apocalyptic language comes in.

Last week Peter Frank commented, 'it's not just about us'! Using Genesis 1 he spoke about creation not just being about us. In quoting Colossians chapter 1 he spoke about redemption not just being about us, but about 'all things'. So too, I wonder the End Times. Surely that's not just about us either. What does it mean for there to be a new heaven and a new earth, as spoken of for example in Isaiah 65 v 17 and Revelation 21? Will there be the same tension between continuity and discontinuity that there is between the resurrected Christ and the pre-crucified Jesus? In other words how will the new heaven and new earth relate to the present heaven and the present earth?

Ruth Valerio in her book goes on to consider the End Times. It is well worth the read.

One of the striking things she says is that apocalyptic writing was used to prompt and urge action in the present. What we think about the End Times affects how we behave and act today. If the earth is something that is discarded when Christ comes then why bother now with the earth. But if the redemption of the whole created order is what Christ died for and looks to fulfil when he returns then this universe is precious and deserves our care and work.

[Hymn StF 724 'As if you were not there'](#). Or H&P 238 'I cannot tell'

1 As if you were not there,
the skies ignite and thunder,
rivers tear their banks asunder,
thieves and nature storm and plunder :
all beware
as if you were not there.

2 As if you were not there,
famine and flood together
usher death, disease and terror ;
stricken mothers wonder whether
God heeds prayer,
as if you were not there.

3 As if you were not there,
we televise the dying,
watch the helpless victims crying,
salve our consciences by sighing,
'Life's unfair !'
as if you were not there.

4 As if you were not there,
your Son, when faith defied him,
faced a crowd which crucified him,
leaving friends who had denied him
in despair,
as if you were not there.

5 Because he rose again
and showed God's love is vaster
than the ultimate disaster,
we entreat you now to master
strife and pain,
because he rose again.

John L. Bell (*b.* 1949) and Graham Maule (*b.* 1958)

Prayers

In the Circuit Lent group last group, we considered our responses to what we'd heard under 4 headings – Pray, Give, take action, share. Ruth Valerio might add 'learn'.

Prayer is important in itself, but it can also prompt the other responses. So, I invite you firstly in a time of silence to sit with what you have heard thus far in Lent – light, water, vegetation and the universe. What is God prompting within you? What is God calling you to do?

Silence

We pray for those organisations and individuals who are seeking to tackle the issue of the Climate Crisis and Biodiversity loss. We pray for local MP Alok Sharma heading up the preparations for COP 26 in Glasgow later this year.

Silence

On this Mothering Sunday we pray for all those for whom this is a difficult day as well as for those who give thanks.

Silence

We pray for those countries which creep on to our television screens for a day or so before disappearing again – Burma/Myanmar, Yemen. For those countries which depend on British Overseas Aid. And for those in government who work with these countries.

Silence

We close with the prayer found in 'Saying Yes to Life':

Our heavenly Father, as we look up to you in the vastness of the skies,
The sun that you have made opens our eyes to a world lit in colour and clarity
And the moon and stars remind us of your faithfulness and steadfast presence,
Amidst the seasons of darkness and our community's moments of uncertainty.
Lord Jesus, you have shown us how from beginning to end was the light of love,
That as endless as the heavens above so is the grace that sustains all things,
So with faith that the Spirit has wrought in us, we seek the care every creature is to have,
As we dream, hope, and labour for a future wrapped in the fullness of joy that your new creation brings.

Amen

Rei Lemuel Crizaldo (Philippines)

Lord's Prayer

[Hymn StF 727 H&P 343 'God in his love for us'](#)

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| 1 God in his love for us lent us this planet,
gave it a purpose in time and in space :
small as a spark from the fire of creation,
cradle of life and the home of our race. | 3 Long have our human wars ruined its harvest ;
long has earth bowed to the terror of force ;
long have we wasted what others have needed,
poisoned the fountain of life at its source. |
| 2 Thanks be to God for its bounty and beauty,
life that sustains us in body and mind :
plenty for all, if we learn how to share it,
riches undreamed-of to fathom and find. | 4 Earth is the Lord's : it is ours to enjoy it,
ours, as God's stewards, to farm and defend.
From its pollution, misuse, and destruction,
good Lord, deliver us, world without end ! |

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever he may send you.

May he guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.

May he bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders he has shown you.

May he bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors.

(Northumbria Community)