

Message for Sunday 3 May 2020

Lectionary Readings

Acts 2: 42 – 47

Psalm 23: 1

1 Peter 2: 19 – 25

John 10: 1 - 10

Introduction

If we had been meeting together in worship today, we would have been celebrating the Lord's Supper, otherwise known as Communion or the Eucharist. Our denomination does not acknowledge many symbols in our worship as others do. We do not have the icons commonly used in the Orthodox churches although we had one displayed in our church as a gift from the Greek Orthodox worshippers. Once candles, so much associated with the Catholic and Anglican churches, were never seen in our worship. We have become more used to them in recent years. Before Union, in the Methodist churches, ministers began wearing black undergraduate gowns prompting our five year old son at the time saying that the minister "looked like a Draklia" (Dracula), much to his mother's dismay.

The symbols of bread and wine or grapejuice have remained with most Christian denominations as they have reminded us of some very basic foundations of our faith. Not only did Jesus say, I am the Bread of Life and I am the True Vine, but he gave his body for us and he shed his blood for us. This is why we celebrate Holy Communion and we are reminded of this each time that the sacrament is administered: The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ, given for us, The Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, shed for us. These phrases assert our belief that Jesus Christ gave himself as a final sacrifice for our sin and that our acceptance of his sacrifice is the very core of our faith and the key to the everlasting life that he promised us. In our isolation we are not able to share in Communion but I am sure God would accept us having our own Communion service with the bread and the cup, even if we did it on our own. But then it wouldn't be on our own, would it? We know that God is present with us at all times.

These are all the words you need:

The Body of our Lord Jesus Christ given for us for the remission of sin.

The Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, given for us, we take and drink in remembrance of him.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you have come to us,
You are one with us, Mary's son.
Cleansing our souls from all their sin,
Pouring Your love and goodness in,
Jesus our love for you we sing,
Living Lord.

Our heavenly Father, we come to you in our isolation and yet in communion with Christians throughout the world in the firm belief that whenever we seek you, there you will be. We are amazed at your goodness to us, especially in this country where we can

freely exercise our faith even though there is something wrong in your world that is keeping us apart. Your beautiful creation has been desecrated by a concoction wrought by mankind. In blind arrogance so often we, your creatures, have messed with your creation and brought about the abominable. Forgive us all for when we have rebelled against you, in big matters and small. Assist us to acknowledge your holiness which seems to set you so high above us but in reality brings us close to you because, in your great holiness, you find us acceptable. Help us to be worthy of your love and reflect your holiness throughout our world. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

You might like to hear the hymn Lord Jesus Christ.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekVLG-p8Xsc>

Some reflections on our Readings

There are two words that echo through the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments. Probably our first recognition of these words comes in the story of Moses when he asked God, Who are you? God answered him, I AM who I AM. God doesn't need a name to distinguish him from the myriad other gods that inhabit the many cultures on earth. God is, was and always will be. Jesus echoed the words of Psalm 23 when he said, I am the Good Shepherd. There are many of these I AM statements in the Gospels and I mentioned a couple of them earlier. In our reading from John 10, we hear one that I think is not as often mentioned as some of the others. It is easy to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and we are used to the bread and vine concepts I referred to in relation to the communion service but how do we see Jesus as a Gate? The idea produces some strange pictures in my head.

How do you see the image of a gate? Is it like the huge iron structure that shuts with a resounding clang as a prisoner is taken to life behind bars? (My only experience of this is in movies, I hasten to add.) Is it in the forbidding locked portal to a convent or an orphanage in Victorian England? (Again, movies and Dickens novels.) Is it the happy opening in a picket fence that opens as a welcome to someone's home? Most of us are old enough to remember Ma and Pa Kettle movies. In the movies Pa Kettle always went through the gate, very deliberately closing it after he went through even though there was no fence stretching away from the gate. There were just two posts and Pa Kettle's gate out in the open. Somehow I don't think that Jesus was asking us to compare these gates with his role in our lives. Jesus says, I am the gate for the sheep. I am the gate. Whoever comes in by me will be saved? I have been told that in Jesus' time, the shepherd would want to shut his sheep away to protect them from predators and that the small enclosure where he kept his sheep did not actually have a gate. Instead, the shepherd himself slept across the opening, laying his own welfare down to protect his flock. That certainly creates a picture in my mind that illustrates the care and protection provided by the shepherd. It would also have been something that the people he spoke to at the time could understand.

Suppose that there was, in fact, a gate across the enclosure. How would that help us know more about Jesus? The gate would have one function by day and other by night. In the daytime, it would be open to allow the sheep to go about their lives being sheep. Their main job would be to grow wool. As the sheep grazed, their wool grew and so they were doing their job. At night they returned to the fold and were shut away safely behind a closed gate. It was the gate that enabled them to carry out their specified role in life and protected them when danger was around. These sound like appropriate interpretations of the parable also.

In the earlier part of the reading, Jesus describes what would probably be the daily grind of a shepherd in his day. Yet the disciples do not understand what he meant so Jesus did something quite unusual. He then explained to parable to his disciples. This is something that does not usually happen with his parables. Why would Jesus have to explain that he meant that he is the shepherd when we know quite well that his disciples knew what a shepherd's life entailed. I think that it is the familiarity of the description of the shepherd's life that is the problem. There is an old adage, You can't see the wood for the trees. The disciples just don't get the point and Jesus had to lay it down clearly for them. This, I believe is the lesson for us today. So often, the answer is staring us in the face and we don't see it. The old chorus goes, Open our eyes, Lord, We want to see Jesus. The truth can be hidden in plain sight. If we care to look, we might find Jesus in all sorts of situations. We might even find God in this Coronavirus pandemic. I have heard people describe that they have gone through a difficult part of their lives and they say, I wouldn't want to repeat the experience, but I thank God that I have had it because it has shown me something I needed to learn.

I commend the readings for today. They might be very familiar to us but we have often sung these words in a hymn: The Lord has yet more light and truth to shine forth from his word. God can teach us more – even at our age! May this be your experience.

Hymn: We limit not the truth of God

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

Benediction

May the Lord watch between me and thee, while we are absent, one from the other. Amen.