

Virtual Worship

Sunday 11th October 2020

Good morning everyone, and welcome to worship with the churches of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC. My name is Ruth Dillon and I am the minister of Fleet URC and Beacon Hill URC and I shall be leading us in worship. You are all most welcome.

Today we shall be having a live Zoom service, and this will be recorded then uploaded to YouTube and also on Twilio, the audio service.

Our opening words this morning are taken from the familiar and well-loved Psalm .. Psalm 23

Psalm 23

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.*

*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff— they comfort me*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.*

*Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.*

The Gospel reading today addresses our response to God, within the context of being invited to a wedding feast and the possibility of being thrown out for not wearing the right clothes.

So our theme today is

The upside down kingdom of Heaven.

However, let us pause and put aside the distraction of the moment,

To be still before our God
To abide in the shadow of God
To be with the God in whom we trust.

Opening music

Organ Music
Nessie Black, Fleet URC

Call to worship

Leader To you we come, Lord,
All for you are a refuge for the poor.

Leader We draw near with our concerns,
**All for you are a refuge for the needy
in their distress.**

Leader In you we pause and rest,
**All for you are a shelter from the storm,
and a shade from the heat.**

Leader It is to you that we offer our worship today.
Amen.

Prayers of Adoration, confession and Lord's Prayer

As we come before God this morning, there is a response in our prayers of confession. When I say the words '**But sometimes**', can you respond by saying '**we say no**'.

God of light and love, on this day of rejoicing, we come to praise your name and say thank you for all the goodness you give us. For your gentleness and compassion...

For your peace within...

For your light in the darkness...

For hope when all seems hopeless...

For love beyond measure...

Generous God, as we will be hearing the Gospel reading from Matthew about guests at a wedding banquet, you invite us to share in the feast but we can be so busy with our own affairs, And sometimes**we say no**.

Generous God, you honour us and call us, and when the moment comes, we look at others and not at ourselves and miss the moment, and sometimes**we say no**.

Generous God, you ask us to be ready; you ask us to share in your work; you desire us to play a part, but sometimes.....**we say no**.

Forgive us, and inspire us with the generosity of your love that we may live and love and share your feast.

And now let us be silent before God as we open our hearts to seek God's forgiveness.

Silence

God in whom we live and move and have our being, Your tenderness and mercy surrounding us, and making us whole again - restored, forgiven and free.

In your sight we are new creations, full of potential and vessels of love. Let us be the action you desire, the wisdom you crave for And the faithfulness you deserve.

You say to each one of us, *your sins are truly forgiven*, yet you also say these words, *come now and follow me*.

And now let us say the prayer that Jesus taught his friends to say

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done,
in earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.

Readings Now we shall hear today's readings, from Kathy Le Fanu and Karen Smith, who both attend Beacon Hill URC at Hindhead. Kathy will be reading **Isaiah 25:1-9** and Karen will reading **Matthew 22:1-14**

Isaiah 25: 1 – 9 read by Kathy Le Fanu

1 LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done wonderful things, things planned long ago. 2 You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt. 3 Therefore strong peoples will honour you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you.

4 You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall 5 and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. 7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

9 In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."

Matthew 22: 1 -14 read by Karen Smith

1 Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: 2 "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. 4 "Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' 5 "But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. 6 The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city.

8 "Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. 9 So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' 10 So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. 11 "But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 12 He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. 13 "Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie his hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 14 "For many are invited, but few are chosen."

Reflection The upside down Kingdom of Heaven.

What a year it has been for our UK Government, having to deal with Covid19 within our shores, the deaths and infections, the changes, and our new normal culture...and now Long Covid, all of which have affected our sense of identity.

Also, at the moment we are holding concluding talks on Brexit, and from what started out as being very upbeat by our Prime Minister, we now find ourselves in a possible no deal scenario.

The Monarchy has also had its fair share of change, with Harry and Meghan leaving and living in the USA, followed by the countless reports and books released that give an explicit account of why they have left, and relationship difficulties.

Continued rising infections, local lockdowns, employment insecurity, movement in relationships - all seem a far cry from the start of 2020, a new decade, a celebration on New Year's Day only nine months ago.

And if we think that our friends over the pond are having it easier, then think again. We have a President who thinks it is perfectly normal to put his security service and their families at risk, all for a wave to his supporters. The two situations may be different but the underlying issue is the same: when we least expect it, things change, and our perspective on life alters.

So to the wedding! I have preached on this parable before, of course. I have preached it as it is written and

as it is most often typically understood — as a kind of warning to accept the invitation to the 'banquet' and to be ready to do so.

For who turns down the invitation of the king? Even if one is not a particularly strong supporter of a ruler, don't you think you would show up out of curiosity, or just to rub elbows with the wealthy and powerful?

Fast forward again a few thousand years and take up residence in the culture I call home, in Fleetwood, in fact to my junior school Rossall. When I was 10 years old, my head mistress told our form that she had accepted and attended an invitation to the Queen's Garden party in London. She described the clothes she had bought and communicated the event to us wide eyed children. One event she recalled perfectly, was when Prince Phillip came down the long staircase at Buckingham Palace. She said her knees felt like jelly, as he was so tall and handsome, and as a young girl, I can remember her voice - yes even now - so excited and thrilled.

I now wonder how Mrs Kirk-Smith, my head teacher, felt about going, as she had told us how she had moved heaven and earth to get there, and be part of the celebrations. Attending a function and occasion of rejoicing can have a huge effect on our lives. However, what happens when we reject it, and choose a reason not to attend: maybe political, maybe if the person holding the party is someone you dislike, or maybe even envy.

For you see, the 'king' as described in the narrative of Matthew is not one that seems anything like the God I

have been taught to worship, much less one I could give my allegiance to in this life. For this king rules with threat and violence and vengeance — even though at first it seems that violence is only in response to violence already perpetrated by his citizens. Even so, the God who is Jesus surely does not rule in this way and so I wonder how it is that we so quickly fall into what, for centuries, has been perhaps the most obvious, straightforward understanding of Jesus' words today.

But what if?

- those invited did not come to the banquet... as a sign of protest?
- they did not drop everything and go ...because the promises of the king were false ...or because in this king's reign there was no justice ...or because the poor were left in their poverty with no recourse?
- they did not go to celebrate with the king ...because the king was not a king worthy of the title?

Certainly, some people who live in oppressive regimes wind up behaving in ways which are otherwise reprehensible simply because they feel they have no other choice, and the killings that occur certainly reflect that thought. And it is worth noting that not everyone behaved in this way and yet the king, in his vengeful ways not only punishes the 'murderers', but everyone else who called that city home.

And this is why I can't help but wonder if the king was only trying to fill that banquet hall so as not to suffer

shame in the eyes of friends and adversaries alike. I cannot help but believe that Jesus was, in fact, more like those who would never have been among the first invited to the wedding banquet of the king's son, but would have found himself in the second batch of invitees.

Indeed, as this parable comes to its conclusion, I cannot help but wonder if Jesus is not the one without the wedding robe — the one who could not, would not pretend to honour a tyrant king by putting on that wedding robe — who on behalf of all of us was thrown into the outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. Yes, this parable can turn the wedding party and those who attending upside down.

I have no way of knowing this for sure, of course.

- And yet, the Bible is a Living Word, is it not?
- And isn't it possible that it might take on new meaning in new days?

And isn't it just as likely that the kingdom of heaven is more like any one of us who refuses to bow to the powers that be when innocents suffer than like a king who throws his power around and destroys those who would not do his will?

Jesus yet again is giving us a direction to follow, and also turning the party and world upside down more than ever in these troubled and challenging times:

- the expected becomes the unexpected

- the wearing of clothes becomes insignificant
- the reasons for celebration become unclear

More than this, the places my imagination took me this week as I pondered this parable seem more in keeping with the way Jesus often turned things inside out and on their heads when he told stories.

Jesus, you turn our world upside down,
that we may think harmoniously,
that we may act with justice
And speak with compassion. Help us to stand with up in our
upside - down kingdom of Heaven. So why not with this
story?

Prayer

**Loving God, you invite us to be your children.
Help us to be ready to do what you want us to do,
to see you in the world,
and to love as you love us.
When we say 'yes' may we mean 'yes',
and always do as we have promised.
For your name's sake. Amen**

Hymn

O Lord, all the world belongs to You
and You are always making all things new.
What is wrong, You forgive,
and the new life You give
is what's turning the world upside down.

The world's only loving to its friends,
but Your way of loving never ends,
loving enemies too;

and this loving with You
is what's turning the world upside down.

The world lives divided and apart,
You draw men together, and we start
in our friendship to see
that in harmony we
can be turning the world upside down.

The world wants the wealth to live in state,
but You show a new way to be great:
like a servant You came,
and if we do the same,
we'll be turning the world upside down.

O Lord, all the world belongs to You
and You are always making all things new.
What is wrong, You forgive,
and the new life You give
is what's turning the world upside down. ©1965 Josef Weinberger

Prayers of intercession

Lord, we pray for the unexpected in our lives
for those who are unexpectedly burdened with stress and
anxiety.

Come into our turmoil,
and may your presence give strength and calmness.

Lord, we pray for the unexpected in our lives
for those who suffer from the wounds of war, violence
and hatred.

May they know healing,
and be inspired by the hope of your kingdom.

Lord, we pray for the unexpected in our lives

for all who bear ancient grudges or bitter hatreds,
held and nurtured over generations.
Wash away the memory of hurt and neglect,
that they/we may know unity and wholeness.

In the silence we offer our own private prayers to you.

Take away our selfishness,
so that we can share the joys, and feel the sorrows,
of our neighbours.
May your peace, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.

Closing prayer

May God's goodness strengthen you.
May God's mercy comfort you.
May God's promise of eternal life inspire you
with hope and love.
In the name of the Father, Son and Spirit.

Blessing

May the blessing of God
that is truly beyond all human understanding
with us now and forever more
Amen

Closing music

Organ Music

Nessie Black, Fleet URC