

Worship - Sunday 22nd November 2020

Surprise Surprise!

Opening music: Jesus shall reign
where're the sun

Good morning everyone, and
welcome to today's worship with the
churches of Fleet URC and Beacon
Hill URC. Our Minister, Ruth, will be
bringing her thoughts on the Gospel
reading in the reflection and I will be
leading us in prayer today.

Let's take a moment to set aside the
busyness of our day and settle
ourselves ready for worship this
morning.

Silence

Opening Prayer

Open our eyes, ever-present God,
To see you here and now in this
place and in one another.

Open our ears, Word of Life,
To hear you speaking in the words
we hear and say and sing
and in the silence.

Open our hearts, transforming Spirit,
to change and renewal in each of us
in our lives together and our witness
to the world.

Already, God of extravagant
generosity,
You have opened your hands and
poured out your life for us;
open our minds to your greatness
and our lives to your service. Amen

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Call to worship

Based on Psalm 100

We gather to celebrate and joyfully
sing to our God!

Together, let us share our praises
and thankfulness.

**Come, let us enter into this sacred
space with praise.**

You O God, are the Holy God
always and forever!

You are the Eternal One from whom
all things come.

**Come, let us enter into this sacred
space with thanks.**

O God, we are your children,
created by and with your love.

**Come, let us enter into this sacred
space with joy and delight. Amen.**

With the following acknowledgement:

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Prayers of Thanksgiving and confession

Wonderful God! We thank you for
our life together in Christ.

It is in Him and through Him that we
have been made one.

We thank you that though we are all
very different people,

That though we come from different
places and have different hopes and
fears,

Different thoughts and expectations,
yet we are one in Christ.

Thank you for the hope, the joy, the
peace and the love with which you
have flooded our lives;

For the new awareness of your presence in every moment of our lives.

We praise you for the joy we have received from family and friends and through the wonder of your creation. We are grateful for those whose love and kindness have changed our lives, our attitudes and our hearts.

We thank you for the knowledge that Christ is our Saviour and that Jesus is Lord;

For your hope for the future, your cleansing for the past and your power and presence for today.

We thank you and ask that by your Holy Spirit we may live, speak and act as your thankful people every day of our lives.

In the name of Christ who makes us one. Amen

500 Prayers p.108 168 our oneness in Christ

God of love, you created us to love you and one another. We confess that we have sometimes limited that love to words and failed to make that love real by our actions. We have failed to recognize Christ in the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the incarcerated and the sick. Too often, we have turned away from your presence, failing to share what we have with our brothers and sisters in need. Forgive us. Turn our hearts and guide us to follow in your ways anew.

Words of Assurance

Our God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love.

**God is good to all and has
compassion for all creation.**

And let us find strength and
reassurance in the words given to us
to pray:

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who 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:

**Ezekiel 34: 11 – 16, 20 – 24 read
by Mike Walters**

¹¹For thus says the Lord God: I
myself will search for my sheep, and
will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds
seek out their flocks when they are
among their scattered sheep, so I
will seek out my sheep. I will rescue
them from all the places to which
they have been scattered on a day
of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will

bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and

the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord God to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken.

Matthew 25: 31 – 46 read by Jennifer Radford

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I

was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil

and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Reflection Reverend Ruth Dillon

One of the programmes on the TV a long time ago was *Surprise, Surprise!* with Cilla Black, and if I remember rightly Holly Willoughby recently brought the programme back to our screens. It was a programme where the unexpected happened and surprises were made in the most unlikely circumstances: families reuniting after 30—40 years apart, or finding the man who rescued a little girl 30 years ago so she could say thank you! Do you like surprises? I’ll be honest, I have a love-hate relationship with them. I really like surprising *others* – with an unexpected visit or gift, for instance – but I am really on edge if I sense a surprise coming my way.

A bit hypocritical, perhaps, but there you go. I think it's that I like being prepared, feeling more or less ready for what's coming, and surprises can undermine that kind of confidence.

I ask this question because I think today's passage turns on the matter of surprises.

Notice that both those identified as sheep and those named goats are surprised by what Jesus says. "Lord, when *did* we..." and "when *didn't* we...", and both capture the shock each group expresses when Jesus commends or condemns their behaviour.

But what exactly are they surprised by? That they acted either in a righteous way by feeding the hungry,

clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned or, on the other hand, in an unrighteous way by neglecting to do the same?

Interestingly, *no*. Neither group denies their behaviour. Rather, they are surprised by their failure to recognize the Son of Man!! Or, more to the point, they are surprised by where the Son of Man hangs out.

No one, that is, expects to see Jesus in the face of the disadvantaged, the poor, the imprisoned, and all those who are in manifest need. Perhaps that's to be expected. When we think of God, we typically think in terms of power and might and glory and all the rest. And, indeed, the parable begins by describing the coming of the Son of Man in glory to sit on his

throne attended by angels, seemingly only reinforcing our preconceptions.

Yet might this be a deliberate set-up?

The rest of the parable, after all, depicts this same royal figure as identifying with 'the least of these' and thereby seems to undermine our tendency to look for God in places of power.

If so, then this parable might not only call into question where we typically look for God, but actually reorient us to discover and experience God's presence in our lives more fully than ever before.

In this parable, it seems to me, Jesus promises to be always with

and for those who are in greatest need. Which means that if we want to experience God's presence fully, deeply, and truly, we will look for God in the need of those around us and, indeed, in our own need as well.

This is not, I realize, what we expect of God.

We typically think of God in ultimate terms – all-knowing, all-powerful, all-just, and so on. And that makes a certain sense, as we are talking about the creator of the cosmos and author of all life. But that's not where Jesus invites us to meet, or be met by, God. And this act of condescension takes us by surprise, upsetting our expectations and disrupting our plans.

But maybe it shouldn't, as the God we know in Jesus seems to delight in such surprises.

After all, God didn't come to reign over humanity at Athens or Rome or any of the other major cities where one would expect God to arrive, but rather – *surprise!* – God came to identify *with* us by being born in lowly Bethlehem in the form of a vulnerable infant.

And God didn't come to conquer the world with military or political might, but instead – *surprise!* – in the scandal, shame, and pain of the cross.

So also God continues to come where we least expect God to be: in the plight of the homeless, on the

side of the poor, in the face of the needy, and in the company of the imprisoned.

The God we know in Jesus is revealed, that is: not in power, but in vulnerability, not in might, but in brokenness, and not in judgment, but in mercy.

Perhaps Jesus says in this parable what he has been saying all along through his teaching and actions and what he will soon say in and through his very body: that God loves us and all the world so much that God has decided to identify with us fully and completely. And so we recognize God most easily in the face of our neighbour, meet God in the acts of mercy and service we offer and are offered to us, and live in the blessing

of God as we seek to serve as Christ served.

And this seems to me like surprisingly good news: that God is with us, here and now, revealed in the fellowship of broken people - yes, broken people - we call church, made real in the ordinary elements of bread and wine, and available to us in the seemingly small gestures of mercy we offer and are offered each and every day.

It may not be where we expect God to show up, but it is just where we need God to be... as we approach Advent and Christmas.

Hymn: Meekness and Majesty

Meekness and majesty, manhood and deity,
In perfect harmony the Man who is God.
Lord of eternity dwells in humanity,
Kneels in humility and washes our feet.

Refrain

*O what a mystery, meekness and majesty,
Bow down and worship for this is your God.
This is your God.*

Father's pure radiance, perfect in innocence,
Yet learns obedience to death on a cross.
Suffering to give us life,

Conquering through sacrifice,
And as they crucify prays Father
forgive... *Refrain*

Wisdom unsearchable, God the
invisible,
Love indestructible in frailty appears.
Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly,
Lifts our humanity to the heights of
His throne... *Refrain*

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This is the final week in the
lectionary year. It seems right to
acknowledge the gifts given
throughout these strange times we
have experienced in 2020 by the
congregations at both Beacon Hill
URC and Fleet URC. Those who
can have continued to give to the
churches and although there might

not be a 'collection' in our services
each week, this dedicates all that
has been given in service to God.
Let us pray.

Offertory Prayer

God of mercy and compassion, what
is the offering that pleases you
most? Certainly, not the token gift
that makes us feel we have done all
that is required, but a gift that
reminds us that need is all around
us, and compassion and love are
needed desperately and can be
given extravagantly. May the gifts
we give through your church help
the hungry, thirsty, the imprisoned;
but may our whole being be centred
on seeing the opportunities to
personally make your love real to a

hurting world. We follow in Christ's holy, loving way. Amen.

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/>

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray.

Loving God we come before you now to pray for our world. The world which you created, in which there is so much trouble. Help us to mend your broken world that all may live in peace. We pray for world leaders as they seek to do the best they possibly can in leading us through the pandemic. Give them guidance and wisdom in all their decision-making as they seek to bring the virus under control.

Silence

We pray for the church across the world as it seeks to serve and to share the good news amidst the pandemic. Give strength and peace to our church leaders as they seek to guide us throughout this difficult time. May they find rest and renewal in you when they need it. We pray for our own churches and for the day in which we can all safely meet together for worship once more.

Silence

We pray for all those who are in need of our prayers at this time, those in hospital and those who care for them, those struggling with mental health problems, those who feel alone with no one to whom they can turn. We pray for those on the frontline who are working to

overcome the virus. May they know your peace, strength and love. We bring before you our concerns for people we know who are in need of our prayers at this time.....

Silence

We commend to you those who have died, knowing that you welcome them home with open arms. Comfort those who mourn their loss and may they know your presence with them at this difficult time.

Silence

We pray for ourselves. You alone know what we need right now. Give us what we need to face the days ahead as we continue to wrestle with this pandemic which affects us all in

some way or another. We ask these and all our prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/our-faith/worship/singing-the-faith-plus>

Closing prayer & Blessing - Rev'd Ruth Dillon

May God surprise us within the wonder of creation.

May Jesus surprise in the friend and stranger.

May the Holy Spirit leap with joy as we recognise the living Christ meeting the needs who are the least in our society

And may the grace and love of God, which is beyond our human understanding,
be with us and remain with us, now and forever more.

Closing music: Shepherd Divine

Opening & closing music from

<https://www.smallchurchmusic.com/>

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