

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Address

May the words of my lips, and the thoughts and meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our Strength and Redeemer

Both as a Grandfather, and as a retired Schoolmaster and Chaplain, I feel so keenly the effect this horrific pandemic is having upon the lives of young people and their education. Our granddaughter Sophie began university life last October, and despite being confined to a bubble in her Hall of Residence, she contracted the virus within two weeks. Fully recovered; she is now working at home online. Her brother Henry has just had his A-level exams cancelled, and their cousin Lily her GCSE's. The other morning, they were all still asleep at 10 o'clock, and missing online lessons. In addition, of course they are unable to meet up with friends and enjoy life, as young people are so good at doing. Working alone online at home requires so much self-discipline, motivation and effort. Fortunately, they have loving and secure family homes. Our thoughts and prayers should be very much with those children in broken homes and families, and those in households where there is financial hardship. Today let us hold in our prayers the young people in our choir here at St John's who are forced to self-isolate and are unable to share the fun and fellowship that comes with singing and just being together.

We of course as a Church family and worshipping community suffer similar hardships, unable to meet together for worship, to receive and share Holy Communion, and enjoy the support and fellowship of Church life.

Today I am going to adopt the role of Schoolmaster Priest. I'm going to say comparatively few words, but leave you, like those poor young students, with a lot of online study, and a lot of homework [or prep as we used to call it a generation or so ago]

First, although I am not setting any exams, I would ask you to begin with some serious *Revision*. I have supplied below the text, and a recording of a Service I delivered on the 3rd Sunday after Trinity last year. It is on the theme of *Prayer*. It stresses the importance of private prayer in our Christian lives in normal times. In Lockdown, with closed Churches, the need for private prayer and devotion, like the virus itself, increases exponentially. Fortunately, in Lockdown the opportunity for personal prayer increases exponentially as well. The Service speaks of the beauty of private prayer. It also speaks of the difficulties we can encounter when we really begin to engage seriously in prayer and spiritual growth. Choosing and following God's will, as opposed to our own self-will, I describe, as *a bit of a struggle*. Such spiritual struggle brings to life that wrestling match that takes place between Jacob and God at Penuel that we read about in the Book of Genesis. Please do your revision conscientiously. I invite you to study, read and pray that service as a spiritual exercise, and hopefully not just once. It is my hope and prayer that you will gain, as have I, a great deal of spiritual enrichment by so doing.

My second concern is a question of *Timetabling*. How do we spend our days, in Lockdown, or indeed in normal times? Do we have a discipline of daily worship or prayer: or is that something we reserve just for Sunday, or every other Sunday or even longer? A clergyman in the Church of England is required to recite each day Morning and Evening Prayer. What person called by God would not wish to anyway? Nowadays these Services can be found online and I hope you will explore the Church of England Common Worship Website **[Link A see below]**: and of course join Gerry in his offerings of Morning and Evening Prayer. Can I also commend to you the Roman Catholic *Universalis* Website **[Link B]**. This offers each day the Monastic Offices. They begin with Lauds each morning, and provide worship throughout the day, with Terce, Sext, None and Vespers. And the day closes with the beautiful service of Compline. What better way is there to hallow each day? Do please explore these sites, (I have provided the links) and hopefully you will begin little by little, to engage with them, and thereby deepen and grow in a discipline and

pattern of worship and prayer which you will find so enriching. Again, initially it may be a bit of a struggle, but if you persist you will find it an absolute joy, which will sustain you for the whole of your life.

Lastly today could I invite you to deepen your Bible Study as a path to private devotion and prayer? Why not begin by thinking about and collecting on a 'page' on your computer, those passages of Scripture which are particularly special for you, those which leap off the page as you read them, and really speak to you. Add to these your own favourite prayers; and compose prayers of your own. And don't forget to make your own Intercession list, where you can pray for those who really need our prayers. I attach below a link **[C]** for the Bible Hub, which gives easy access to each, and every verse of the Bible.

Well I don't ask you to do things all at once: or necessarily to do them all. Nor shall I ask you to hand in your homework! But I prayerfully hope we shall all make an effort: and instead of living in a spiritual vacuum, while we are in Lockdown and our Churches are closed, I hope we may individually and corporately develop our spiritual lives, by engaging, and deepening and growing in personal devotion and prayer.

Above all, thereby, may we all come to a fuller personal knowledge of the love of God for each one of us, which is His gift to us through Christ.

And may we each experience more fully the grace, the love, the joy, the hope, the peace of Our Lord's loving and living Presence, with us, each moment, of each day, of our lives. **Amen**

The Third Sunday after Trinity

Good morning, and welcome most warmly to our worship on this the Third Sunday after Trinity.

Our Collect and Gospel for today are taken from the Book of Common Prayer, and we begin with the Collect

Let us pray

O LORD, we beseech thee mercifully to hear us; and grant that we, to whom thou hast given a hearty desire to pray, may by thy mighty aid be defended and comforted in all dangers and adversities; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

That prayer speaks of *God's gift to us of a hearty desire to pray*. I would like us to take Prayer as a theme for our thoughts and worship today. Prayer, private and public, sung, spoken and silent, the Sacraments, and Reading and reflecting upon the Scriptures, are all vital parts of our Christian lives. We neglect any one of them at our peril. Prayer is not only a lifeline; it is our Eternal Lifeline. It is through prayer and worship that God feeds us with Himself and feeds us with his love. This He does for our ultimate well-being: what we know and experience as the gift of Eternal Life.

Prayer is our pathway to God, and more importantly it is God's pathway to us. So often we think of Prayer as just our speaking to God. But in Creation, in Redemption, in Sanctification, God always takes the initiative, the first step. And so, with prayer. Prayer is not primarily us talking to God and ticking off a celestial or non-celestial wish list: first and fore-most it is about God speaking to us, making Himself known to us. Prayer is God making His loving will known to us: rather than us following our own *self*-will. Such prayer can be demanding, costly and a bit of a struggle. Through prayer God fills us with His love and grace, his joy and peace, through the Holy Spirit. And that is what in His love He invites and calls us to do, and to receive.

Often that pathway to God, and His pathway to us may appear obscure, dark, even impassable: and God rather distant and remote. Sometimes we can feel reluctant to tread that path anyway. We don't always feel that *hearty desire to pray*. And that is where a discipline of prayer is valuable. But as we pray *in Christ*, and *through Christ*, pleading his *Atoning Love on the Cross*, so the pathway is flooded with light. We discover the Way, and we not only call God by that name, but we know Him and experience Him as our loving Heavenly Father: and taste what can only be described as Heavenly Joy.

It is through prayer and worship that our deepest longings and needs are met, and indeed we come to lay hold of the very reason and purpose of our lives. Through prayer we become what we are really called to *be*, that is to be in a life-giving relationship with God, and a living, loving relationship with one another.

The humanist will rightly point out our desire and need to be in fulfilling human relationships: and in Lockdown, we have so come to know the truth of that, separated as we are from so much of the warmth and beauty of human contact.

Yet relationship with one another is only one dimension. Faith points to, and supplies another: much deeper, and ultimately fulfilling, our relationship with God: God, who is the very ground and source of existence: and God, who is very ground and source of love. And our relationship with God actually embraces, deepens and completes our relationships with one another.

Our Lord affirms the two great commandments as to *Love God, with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our soul and with all our strength: and to love our neighbour as ourself. Do that He says and you will live.*

We are often tempted to interpret these commandments solely in terms of *doing*. Prayer invites us to see these commandments in terms of *being*. It is *being* in a loving relationship with God and with one another through prayer, through Christ, through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, that we become what God wants us to be: and through that same grace we are enabled to do what He would have us do. Through prayer God's loving purpose in creation, His Kingdom of love, comes in us, comes amongst us in His Church, and comes here on earth as it is in Heaven.

And so, let us respond to what God in His love is calling us to do, and to be today. Let our Prayer be not so much a matter of us speaking to God, as in stillness *our listening* to Him. And may we thereby deepen and grow in our knowledge of His love for us in Christ, His life-giving Presence with us and His loving purpose for each one of us and for his world

And so, in Christ and through Christ
we come to God in stillness and in prayer

The beautiful words of the Psalmist

Be still and know that I am God

A period of silence is kept

Let us acknowledge our deep need, hunger and thirst to know God, and to be known by Him

Again, the words of the Psalmist

As the deer yearns for cooling stream

So my soul is thirsting for you my God

And words of St Augustine

*O God, Thou hast made us for Thyself
And our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee*

and words of Lady Julian of Norwich

God, for thy goodness, give me Thyself;

For only in Thee do I have all.

As we listen to God in stillness and He speaks to us, we can often realise our distance from him and our need to be brought back to him. That again is something to which He invites and calls us. Let us listen now to the words of our Gospel for today, taken from Luke 15, one of the most beautiful Chapters of the whole New Testament. It speaks of the overflowing love and mercy of God, taking the first step, always seeking to restore us to Himself. Let us remember that in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which ends the chapter, we have that beautiful image of God *running up the road* to embrace us with his forgiveness.

THE GOSPEL

St. Luke 15.1-10

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? "When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. "And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' "I tell you that in the same way, there will be *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? "When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

This is the Gospel of the Lord
Praise be to Thee O Christ

And so let us call to mind and confess our sins: and not just those *things* that we have done, or not done, but those inner attitudes, which act as a barrier between ourselves and God, and between ourselves and one another.

Let us use these simple words to confess our sins and seek God's pardon, healing and forgiveness

Crucified Christ,
In
Sorrow
Sin
Come
I
to
Thee

In
Mercy
Love
come
Thou
to
me

And the simple oft repeated words of the Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ
Son of God
Have mercy upon me
A sinner

The assurance of God's forgiveness.

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy has promised forgiveness of sins to all them that with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him; Have mercy upon us; pardon and deliver us from all our sins; confirm and strengthen us in all goodness; and bring us to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Let us now Contemplate God's infinite love for each one of us, and for each and every member of His creation

Again some words of Lady Julian

Our beginning was when we we made

But the love in which He made us never had beginning

Nor ever shall have end

And now we contemplate God's love
revealed in the suffering and death on the Cross

In our Gospel reading we heard of the Shepherd going out to seek and save the lost sheep. Let us recall Our Lord's words in John's Gospel

*I am the Good shepherd
The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*

And words from the First Letter of St John which speak of the Divine initiative

*The love I speak of is not our love for God
But the love He showed to us in sending his son as the remedy for the defilement of our sins*

And let us respond to God's love in heartfelt thanksgiving, love and praise towards Him

*Were the whole realm of nature mine
That were an offering far too small
Love so amazing, so divine
Demands my life, my soul, my all*

St John continues

*If God, so loved us dear friends,
We in turn are bound to love one another*

And so we pray for others in their need

And we bring before God our own needs

As we deepen and grow in our knowledge of God's love for us, so may we respond in deepening our love for Him, and our love for one another.

We hold in God's love and our love all those who suffer directly and indirectly from the Coronavirus.

We give thanks and pray for all those who minister to them: and for all who work to supply our daily needs

And we pray for insight and grace to show

our love and God's love for others.

I am going to end our prayers today with what I feel is one of the most beautiful prayers ever to be written. It is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for God's *initiatives of love*. It is also a prayer of dedication and re-dedication of ourselves to God and to His service.

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all people; We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful, and that we shew forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom with thee and the Holy Spirit be all honour and glory, world without end. Amen.

*The peace of God, which passes all understanding,
keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,
And of His son, Jesus Christ Our Lord,
And the Blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son
and the Holy Spirit, be upon us,
and upon all those for whom we pray,
this day and evermore
Amen*

Link A

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/join-us-service-daily-prayer>

Link B

universalis.com.

Link C

<https://biblehub.com>