

SERVICE OF WORSHIP
God's People

Let us worship God, let us pray:

Heavenly Father, once more today we come to worship you. We know we are joined by others of our church fellowship who are worshipping at this time. We are part of a loving church family and for this we feel truly blessed.

Bless us now, Father God, with your presence during this time of worship. Speak to us and meet us in our need. Accept our worship as we offer it all to your glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

HYMN

1. All hail the power of Jesus' name!

Let angels prostrate fall;
bring forth the royal diadem,
and crown Him Lord of all.

2. Crown him, you martyrs of our God,

Who from his altar call;
Extol the stem of Jesse's rod
And crown him Lord of all.

3. Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,

ye ransomed from the Fall,
hail Him who saves you by His grace,
and crown Him Lord of all.

4. Let every kindred, every tribe

on this terrestrial ball,
to Him all majesty ascribe,
and crown Him Lord of all.

5. Oh, that with yonder sacred throng
We at his feet may fall!
We'll join the everlasting song
And crown him Lord of all.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Matthew 16:13-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

1 Peter 2:9-10 New International Version (NIV)

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

MESSAGE

Living a Christian life is not always easy in our society today. A largely secular society with secular values means that, at best, most people are ignorant about religion, and at worst hostile towards it.

Therefore, telling people that we are Christians and that we attend church can prompt a number of responses, from perplexity and incredulity, through to mockery and hostility.

However, don't let this worry you too much because the Church and Christians have been in worse situations in the past and yet we survived and grew stronger.

It was certainly very difficult for the Christians living in what is now modern-day Turkey, about sixty years after Jesus was born. They lived in a pagan society and were laughed at and even beaten and killed because of their faith. Naturally, in such circumstances, many of them felt that it was too difficult living the Christian life and so they were tempted to turn their backs on the faith.

Therefore, Peter, the Apostle who had been one of Jesus' closest disciples, wrote a letter to encourage them to stick with their faith despite the persecutions to which they were being subjected.

I think that Peter's words and his letter- which is to be found in the New Testament- can be a powerful means of encouragement to us today.

Peter is the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Cephas', which means 'rock'. However, the true rock upon which the Church is founded is Jesus Christ. The following are words which are to be found at the end of the book 'Christianity and History' by the late Herbert Butterfield: *"....if one wants a permanent rock in life and goes deep enough for it, it is difficult for historical events to shake it. There are times when we can never meet the future with sufficient elasticity of mind, especially if we are locked in the contemporary systems of thought. We can do worse than remember a principle which both gives us a firm Rock and leaves us the maximum elasticity for our minds; the principle: hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted"*.

So, Christ is our rock and through Christ we believe in God. Peter says that Christians are *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people...."* (1 Peter 2:9).

I think it is a real tonic to hear Christianity described in this way, especially these days when we are so often ignored or misunderstood. Although it has to be pointed out that such descriptions, as used by Peter and others, were not always appreciated by those outside the Church, but then, they weren't meant to be! Celsus was a 2nd century opponent of Christianity. He wrote: *"You Christians are like frogs croaking around a pond, saying- 'We are God's people. God has revealed everything to us'. Silly, arrogant nobodies- lot of washerwomen"*.

So there we are! I suppose there are worse things that we could be called than washerwomen!! When I first read the above quotation by Celsus, apart from finding it laughable, I was reminded of a true story about Lenin. If you have ever feared for the future of the Church in this country then remember this story and it will give you heart.

After the revolution in Russia in 1917, a number of Bolshevik leaders approached Lenin and said, *"We must destroy the Orthodox Church in Russia because it poses a threat to the success of the revolution"*. Lenin replied in this way: *"The Church is too big, we could not destroy it. But there is no need to, it poses no threat, it is full of babushka's [grandmothers]. When they are gone the Church will be finished"*.

If you look at Russia today, Communism is finished, the revolution has failed, but the Church is still going and it's still full of babushkas!

So, Peter described Christians as a chosen people, a royal priesthood. This is elitist language. If we weren't careful, it could lead us to be rather proud of ourselves, to think that we are something special. Therefore, to avoid this danger, let's not forget that Peter praises Christians and the Church, not really because of anything we do, but rather because of Christ. If we are special in any way, it is because Jesus Christ makes us so. He is our example, our hope in times of difficulty in a spiritually indifferent community.

We are meant to imitate Christ the 'Suffering Servant'. As Christ offered himself to the world through his death on the cross, so we as Christians are to offer ourselves to the world through good deeds, compassion, charity

and love. This is what the world expects from the Church. But more importantly, this is why the world needs the Church.

The world knows of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She was born in 1910 into a Kosovar-Albanian family in Skopje, which was part of the Ottoman Empire. She went to India in 1929 and taught at a convent school in Calcutta, taking her final vows in 1937. She became the principal of the school, but in 1948 she left the convent to work alone in the slums. After medical training in Paris, she opened some classrooms for destitute children in Calcutta. Gradually she was joined by other nuns, and her House for the Dying was opened in 1952. Her sisterhood- the Missionaries of Charity- had started in 1950 Their mission was to care for (in Mother Teresa's words) :*"the hungry, the naked, the **homeless**, the crippled, the blind, the **lepers**, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."*

As we can tell from this outline of Mother Theresa's life and work, she was able to speak from experience about showing Christ to the world through the practical application of Christian love, kindness and compassion. This is what she once said, *"We have a sister working in Calcutta's slums. She came to us from a very well-off family. I always send the sisters to the worst slums as soon as they come. After Mass next morning, she came to me smiling all over her face. 'Mother' she said, 'I have been touching the body of Christ'. They had brought to our house a man whose body was being eaten by maggots....how could she do such a thing without Christ?People do not expect from the Church a constant stream of statements. They expect love, concern and caring. They [the nurses] make their statements with their lives and their commitment to Christ"*.

What Mother Theresa is saying is that one can make statement of faith with actions as well as with words. Indeed, actions speak louder than words. As Ralph Waldo Emerson put it: *"Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying"*.

Most people have heard the word 'orthodoxy', which emphasises correct belief. A less well known word is 'orthopraxis'. It comes from Latin and essentially means 'right action'. In theology, the word orthopraxis is often

used in connection with ‘Liberation Theology’, which tries to interpret the Christian Faith from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.

Gustavo Gutierrez, who was one of the leading proponents of Liberation Theology, wrote this: *“The Church has for centuries devoted her attention to formulating truth and meanwhile did almost nothing to better the world”*.

Now, I don’t agree entirely with this statement. In my opinion, it is plain fact that the Church and Christians have done a tremendous amount down the centuries to better the world. Having said this, I do understand the point Gutierrez is trying to emphasise, namely that talk is of little use if it leads not to action. Knowing and doing are related; Christian action validates Christian truth. This reality has good Biblical foundations: God communicates with us not principally through words, but in creation, miracles, providence, actions.

In Cornwall, at Newquay and Portraeth, are examples of the Huer’s Hut. These distinctive whitewashed buildings can be seen from miles around along the coast. The huer would look out from these buildings scanning the sea all day and during moonlit nights. He was looking for shoals comprising millions of pilchards. Upon seeing such a shoal, he would blow on a large horn and shout ‘Here they are’ to alert the people of the town, who would drop everything to rush down to the harbour to launch their boats and try to land tons of fish. The huer was chosen carefully because he had an important role to play.

In this secular country and sceptical age, it is our role to keep a careful lookout for the work of God going on around us, and through our actions and deeds, to offer Christ to people and direct them to faith in him, just as the huer directed people to those shoals of fish. As the Apostle Peter said to the Christians in first century Asia Minor: *“You were chosen to tell about the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”* (1 Peter 2:9). Amen.

PRAYER

Almighty and wonderful God, you are greater than we can ever imagine and higher than our highest thoughts. Hear us now and respond as you will as we bring our prayers before you.

Give us strength and courage to live our daily lives as Christians. Sometimes we feel misunderstood by many within our secular society. Give us confidence to proclaim that we are followers of Jesus Christ. Help us to remember that the best kind of testimony is not given with words but rather through action- love, kindness, forgiveness and compassion in the name of Christ.

Living God, there is so much in this society and in this world that reveals you and your love, power and purpose. We see your actions and activities in our own lives, in our daily experience and in the world around us. We feel you in the fellowship we share with others and in the joy of family and friends.

Show us, God, how best we can reveal your love and care to others who do not have faith. As the huer pointed to shoals of fish, so may we in all we say and do, point others to you and to your activity in the world.

There are many situations concerning us this morning and many people we wish to pray for, particularly we pray for.....

Loving God, open our eyes so that we may glimpse you at work. Open our ears to hear what you wish to say to us, open our minds to understand your purpose, and open our hearts to you and to all you wish to accomplish in and through us.

Speak through us Father God, as we work and witness for you, so that others may come to know you for themselves.

All this we ask in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray saying *Our Father, who art in heaven....*

HYMN

1. Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down;

Fix in us thy humble dwelling;
All thy faithful mercies crown!
Jesus, Thou art all compassion,
Pure unbounded love Thou art;
Visit us with Thy salvation;
Enter every trembling heart.

2. Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit,
Into every troubled breast!
Let us all in Thee inherit;
Let us find Thy promised rest.
Take away the love of sinning;
Alpha and Omega be;
End of faith, as its Beginning,
Set our hearts at liberty.

3. Come, Almighty to deliver,
Let us all Thy grace receive;
Suddenly return and never,
Never more Thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve Thee as Thy hosts above,
Pray and praise Thee without ceasing,
Glory in Thy perfect love.

4. Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
'Till in heaven we take our place,
'Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.

BLESSING

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever, Amen.
