**The Parishes of Crail and St Ayle**

**Reflections for the Locked out - Locked Down Church from Peter Neilson**

**Sunday 17 May 2020**

Good morning and *shalom* to all my friends in Crail and St Ayle.

**Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Welcome to our time of worship and reflection. I hope that you are keeping safe and well as we move towards a new phase of tentative movement and social re-engagement. For the foreseeable future, our church buildings are closed, but we know God does not live in temples made with hands. He lives in the temple of the human heart, and that new Temple made of living stones with Jesus as the foundation stone. So this morning we ARE God’s building and he is present among us.

**Gathering into the Presence of God**

I see in my diary that, if we had been meeting for worship this morning, I would have been leading our worship together. I suspect we miss elements of communal worship, however we much might be learning to worship “alone together”. What is it that you miss about worshipping together?

For me – I miss singing! I enjoy the full range of worship music: traditional psalms and hymns, choral classics, contemporary worship songs, Taize meditative chants, Wild Goose Worship Songs, and a wide range of reflective music available today. Singing engages our whole body physically, and connects us to the whole spiritual Body of Christ, across the world, across the ages and across the traditions. As we lift up our hearts to God in praise, we lift up one another in a rising tide of faith.

*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 5:20)*

So, as you settle for this time of worship, why not find a favourite “psalm, hymn or spiritual song”? You may want to sing it out loud, or sing it quietly to yourself. You may speak it out loud as a form of encouragement to your brothers and sisters in Christ. Or you may “sing and make music in your heart to the Lord.” God will hear it and be glad.

***Choose your psalm, hymn or spiritual song.***

*“Always giving thanks to God the Father for everything,*

*in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

For the gift of this new day

Unique, never to be repeated

*Thanks be to You, O God.*

For all our senses to savour it

-its colours, sounds, textures, tastes and fragrances

*Thanks be to You, O God.*

For the silent pulse of life within us

The beating heart, the rhythmic breathing, the unbidden reflex.

*Thanks be to You, O God.*

For the face of God made known to us in Christ

*Thanks be to You, Jesus, our Lord.*

For the hidden sins forgiven for us on the Cross

*Thanks be to You, Jesus, our Lord.*

For the everlasting life offered to us through Your resurrection

*Thanks be to You, Jesus, our Lord.*

For the life of God stirring within us

*Thanks be to You, Holy Spirit.*

For the grace of God sustaining us

*Thanks be to You, Holy Spirit.*

For the power of God equipping us

*Thanks be to You, Holy Spirit.*

Eternal God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit,

We give Your our thanks for Your eternal love

Holding, healing, forgiving, and raising us to eternal life,

Through Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord.

*Take two minutes to pray The Lord’s Prayer slowly, lingering on each phrase.*

*Notice that the prayer leads us on a journey inviting us to look in different directions:*

***Our Father....*** *Look upwards, focus on God.*

***Your Kingdom come.....****Look outwards, focus on God’s world.*

***Give...Forgive....Lead.....Deliver.....****Look inwards, focus on ourselves.*

***The Kingdom, the power and the glory....****Look forwards, focus on eternity.*

**A word in your ear**

*Stay alert!*

*Don’t for one minute forget the covenant which God, your God made with you.*

*(Deut 4:23 – The Message)*

“Stay alert!”

A slogan of danger and caution

For staying safe and healthy.

“Stay alert!”

A way of vigilance and watching.

Of being attentive and aware.

“Stay alert!”

A command to remember

God’s covenant love and faithfulness.

“Stay alert!”

“Behold, I am doing a new thing.

Do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19)

“Stay alert!”

**Listening for God’s Word**

The recommended scripture readings for today show us how far the Easter message travelled, geographically and culturally – from Jerusalem to Athens; and how Jesus anticipated his continuing relationship with his followers, not only *with* them in the flesh, but *within* them by his Spirit. The Risen Lord summons us outward and inward – challenging journeys in both directions.

*Lord, give us ears to hear what your Spirit is saying to us. AMEN*

Acts 17:22-31 – Paul with philosophers in Athens

John 14:15-21 – Jesus with his disciples in Jerusalem

**Reflecting on God’s Word**

What are we learning about being church during this season of being locked down and locked out?

**The Outward Journey...**

A recent survey has shown a marked increase in people viewing broadcast services, and tuning into churches who are live streaming their worship. It appears that we are engaging larger numbers than would normally attend worship in a church building. The church has left the building and the Gospel is touching homes and hearts that have been closed to the good news. Thanks be to God for those who are translating the Gospel into the language of the “digital natives” who gather information and build relationships on phones and laptops.

Paul would celebrate these efforts. His visit to Athens was a time of culture shock. He adapted his communication style, latching on to the altar to “the unknown god”. He offered to profile this “unknown god” – Creator, Originator of humankind, the Unseen Presence in which we “live and move and have our being” – certainly not contained in any religious buildings. This God made us with an inbuilt homing instinct to seek him out. It was time to repent and turn back to Him. There will be a day of accountability when Jesus, the resurrected One, will be Judge of all the earth.

By the way, if my life is to be judged at the end of the day, I am glad that Judge is Jesus. I cannot think of anyone I would rather face when the time comes.

In “normal” life, God goes largely ignored. The homing instinct is persistent enough for signs of spiritual searching to break out in a range of ways. But that instinct leaves God unnamed if not unknown. Lifestyles are governed by personal choice without reference to God.

What if this virus is a time to stop and recognise God again and put a name to him? Paul speaks of Jesus appearing at the end of life’s little chapter exposing the reality of what truly matters. What if, before we reach the “full stop”, this lockdown is a comma or semi-colon in mid-sentence, to pause and reflect – and turn again to the God? This is an opportunity to put a face to the unknown God.

**The Inward Journey...**

Let me take you for a moment back to the Upper Room. Speaking with his disciples, Jesus is opening up a whole new possibility of knowing him in a different time and in a different way. He promises to go away, but to come back. He will not abandon them as “orphans”. He will send another Counsellor”. The Greek word is ‘parakletos’, meaning one who comes alongside as a supporter, companion or advocate. He will come not only to be *with* them but to be *within* them.

He declares: *“I am in the Father, and you are in me and I am in you.”* There’s a phrase to sit with and meditate on for a while! “*I am in the Father*” – the unknown God of Athens is a Jesus-like Fatherly God. “*You are in me*” – we are united with Him to “live and move and have our being“ in a mysterious unbreakable union*. “I am in you” –* instead of the distant and unknown God of Athens, we are offered the most intimate relationship possible with the Living Christ, present in us by His Spirit. The key to this is not logic and understanding, but love and obedience:*“If you love me.....”*

I hope and pray that this season of being “alone together”, praying and reflecting on the gifts of God, has helped us all to deepen our relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit – to experience what St Bernard of Clairvaux calls the “kiss of God”.

If I return to wondering about the future of the church beyond this season, I hope that (among other things) we are able to be follow Paul boldly into the market places and places of public discourse so that more people discover the “unknown God”; and I hope that we enter deeply into the mysterious intimacy of relationship that Jesus promised – I in Him, and He in me.

That would be my prayer and my hope for us all.

**Responding to God’s Word and God’s Spirit**

Where the pain of loss haunts us and the fear of the future overshadows us

*Come, Lord, our Light and our Salvation.*

Where homes have become places of tension and abuse,

*Come, Lord, our Peace and our Protector.*

Where poverty has become the welcome host for this killer virus

*Come, Lord, our Judge and our Defender.*

Where isolation spirals down into loneliness and abandonment

*Come, Lord, our Companion and our Friend,*

Where care workers and nurses and doctors serve at great risk

*Come, Lord, our Strength and our Courage.*

Where poor nations wait in fear of devastation to come

*Come, Lord, our Shield and our Shelter.*

Where this virus lurks, poised for another leap of infection

*Come, Lord, our Healer and our Conqueror.* AMEN

**A Meditation before We Go**

I will not die an unlived life,

I will not go in fear

Of falling or catching fire.

I choose to inhabit my days

To allow my living to open me

To make me less afraid.

More accessible,

To loosen my heart

Until it becomes a wing,

A torch, a promise.

I choose to risk my significance:

To live.

So that which came to me as a seed,

Goes to the next as a blossom,

And that which came to me as a blossom

Goes on as a fruit.

[Davna Markova]

**A Blessing**

*Imagine standing with our invisible congregation, blessing one another and our community.*

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

the love of God the Father

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all,

evermore. AMEN

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**Christian Aid**

Christian Aid Week has slipped behind us, without my mentioning it last week. I apologise for that. Since we have not been able to contribute through the usual channels of church collections, I invite you to donate directly through the Christian Aid website.

[www.ChristianAid.org.uk](http://www.ChristianAid.org.uk)

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| |  | | --- | | Christ has no body now but ours. No hands, no feet on earth but ours. Ours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Ours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Ours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Ours are the hands, ours are the feet, ours are the eyes. - St Theresa of Avila | |

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