

Bride Valley Telephone Service for Bible Sunday (Trinity 21)

29th October 2023 – available on 01308 293062

Hello, and welcome to the Bride Valley Telephone service. My name is Paul Cheater, and for those of you who don't know me, I'm one of the three Lay Worship Leaders in the Benefice. So whether you live in the Bride Valley, or another part of the country, or indeed any other part of the world, it's good to be able to share this service with you.

Before we begin our service, let's have a few moments of silence, so that we can prepare ourselves for worship. *Silence*

So we sing our first hymn: Let all the world in every corner sing

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The heavens are not too high,
his praise may thither fly;
the earth is not too low,
his praises there may grow.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!
The church with psalms must shout,
no door can keep them out;
but above all, the heart
must bear the longest part.
Let all the world in every corner sing:
My God and King!

George Herbert (1593-1633) (Public Domain)

Reading:

Our first reading today comes from the Book of Leviticus, chapter 19, 1-2, 15-18

The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.

¹⁵ "'Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favouritism to the great but judge your neighbour fairly. ¹⁶ "'Do not go about spreading slander among your people. "'Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life. I am the LORD. ¹⁷ "'Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbour frankly so you will not share in their guilt.

¹⁸ "'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

HYMN: King of glory, King of peace.

1 King of glory, King of peace,
I will love thee;
and that love may never cease
I will move thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
thou hast heard me;
thou didst note my working breast,
thou hast spared me.

2 Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
and the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.

Though my sins against me cried,

thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they replied,
thou didst hear me.

3 Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee;
in my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
to enrol thee:
e'en eternity's too short
to extol thee.

George Herbert (1593-1633) (Public Domain)

Our second reading comes from the Gospel according to Matthew 24: 30-35

³⁰ "Then will appear the sign of the Son of Man in heaven. And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. ³¹ And

he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.

³²“Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. ³³Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. ³⁴Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³⁵Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

ADDRESS:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, now for ever. Amen

For about ten years, until 2012, I was one of the two organists at a large United Reformed Church in North Oxford. The minister was the Rev Ruth Ball, who was a fine preacher. I don't remember *everything* that she said in her sermons, but I do remember the start of one of them, when she asked, rhetorically, all the 'big' questions that we have all asked at one time or another. At the end of the list, she looked at her congregation and said, 'I can see you all sitting there, settling into your seats and thinking, 'At last! She's going to give us the answers!' Well, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed!' and then explained that there are things that simply cannot be explained and we have to rely on our faith in order to be able to accept them.

At this time, the eyes of the world are fixed on Israel and the Palestinian people. Our hearts turn to our fellow human beings under brutal attack. Terrible tragedies like this beg the question: Where is God? Before trying to respond in any way to that question, I want to suggest, perhaps controversially, that our God is the God of all people, not just Christians, and that we are all equal in the sight of God. He cares for each and every one of us. The problem is, of course, that the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a result of the fundamental tenets of two of the three monotheistic religions, each with their own viewpoint, and different, at least in some ways, from our own. Let's briefly examine these.

Jews believe that they should avoid war at all costs but it is understood that sometimes war may be the only way to resolve problems and bring peace, when all other attempts have failed. It may be that a strike is necessary to prevent the enemy from striking first. In cases of self-defence, Jews believe that war is acceptable, for example if a victim is under attack and they need to defend themselves. The Jewish Bible, the Talmud, states that it is morally acceptable to kill to save your own life. Judaism teaches that humans must not destroy life but preserve it. God created life, and life therefore belongs to God. Only God can take away life, not humans. To take life is a sin and is against God's will.

Islam sets down clear guidelines as to when [war](#) is ethically right, and clear guidelines as to how such a war should be conducted.

In brief, it states that war is permitted: in self-defence; when other nations have attacked an Islamic state; or if another state is oppressing its own Muslims. They also have clear guidelines about how war should be conducted. It should be conducted in a disciplined way; so as to avoid injuring non-combatants: with the minimum necessary force; without anger; with humane treatment towards prisoners of war. And all of that, of course, throws up even more 'big' questions.

I am a Christian minister, however, speaking in a Christian church. There is a young theologian called Julian Paparella, and in order to make sense of some of the bigger questions I often turn to him for an explanation. And rather than try to give an inadequate response as a lay person, I want to read what Julian Paparella says. He writes: 'Though it is difficult to grasp, God is not absent. God is there. God is weeping. God is on the side of those who suffer and hears their cry. God is not fair-weather or disconnected. God is in the midst of suffering, at the very heart of the traumas and tragedies of the world.

There is no doubt that God accompanies the families that are forced to flee and separate. God mourns over the many lifeless corpses that leave us numb. At the same time, God gives courage to people who dare to protest in the face of cruelty, risking their freedom to say no to war. God works to move negotiations forward on the path to peace. God inspires journalists and camera operators who put their lives on the line to capture the reality of what people are going through.

History shows us that it is often in the most crushing darkness that God shines the most radiant light. We can think of the dark cell of St. Maximilian Kolbe, the Polish Catholic priest who volunteered to die in place of another man, in Auschwitz, to save the life of his fellow prisoner. In the heart of horror, God responds by shining a ray of love.

God does not simply to observe the suffering of the world as an indifferent bystander. God makes Himself close. He Himself tells us: "Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you" (Isaiah 41:10). His faithfulness is not extinguished by the darkness of the world: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isaiah 43:2). God opens a way even where there is none. The life that God gives us conquers even death itself.'

Another great theologian, Father Michael Czerny, puts it like this:

"Being close to his people, to his children who suffer, is the way that God has chosen to enter into the history of the world, even at the cost of ending up on the cross." The Creator of the universe was born as a persecuted baby under a ruthless regime of oppression. The Holy Family was forced to flee their homeland, threatened by the bloodthirsty King Herod. Christ was put to death under the flag of the Roman Empire. Jesus declared the persecuted "blessed" (Matthew 5:10-11). The victory of the resurrection opens a path of life even in the grip of death. Here and now, the Risen Jesus comes to redeem even the most helpless situations. Jesus does not take up weapons. His weapon is love. Christ does not massacre our enemies. He changes hearts. The path of Christ passes through our desire for a better tomorrow and a more united world. The peace of Christ leads us to true freedom, far greater than the mere absence of oppression. "Rivers of blood and tears are flowing." There are not only human tears: God's tears mix with ours. The blood being shed is not only that of soldiers and civilians but also the blood of Christ that comes to redeem our deepest misery and suffering. Jesus carries the cross of all people with them. Despite our differences, we can offer them our prayers, our solidarity, and our financial and material support. God is with them, and He wants to come to their aid through you and me. Let us dare to be an unarmed army, committed to rebuilding that humanity which weapons try to destroy."

Let it be our prayer that God will be with all people, regardless of colour, creed, race, religion, or anything else, and give all those who suffer assurance that in the midst of the horrors of war, He is still there, caring, supporting and providing unconditional love.

I've chosen a psalm that provides me, and I'm sure many others, with great comfort. It's Psalm 91.

¹Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.²I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

³Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence.⁴He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.⁵You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day,⁶nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.⁷A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.⁸You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

⁹If you say, "The LORD is my refuge," and you make the Most High your dwelling,¹⁰no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.¹¹For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;¹²they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.¹³You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

¹⁴"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name."¹⁵He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him.¹⁶With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation."

And so to our prayers. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we lift our hearts to you in prayer, we come before you with humility and hope, we recognise that you are a God who listens and cares deeply for every concern that weighs upon our hearts. In spite of all our differences, we hold before you at this time the people of Israel and the Palestinian people, asking you to be with them and to give them hope in the midst of the horrors of war. Lord, in your mercy – **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for our church leaders. Grant them wisdom humility and courage to shepherd your people with love and compassion. May they faithfully use the authority you have bestowed upon them to guide the Church in the path

of truth and unity, and may they be rock-like foundations, standing firm in the face of challenges. Bless them with the ability to discern your will and lead your people closer to you.

Lord, in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

Lord, you created us in your image, and you desire that we should live in harmony with one another. We pray for unity among the nations, and that the barriers of hatred, prejudice, and fear may be dismantled. Help us to see one another as your children, regardless of differences. May our shared humanity bind us together and inspire us to work towards a world where justice and equality prevail. Grant us the wisdom to bridge divides and build bridges of understanding. Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

Lord God, in a world that is scarred by conflicts and misunderstandings, we pray for the gift of reconciliation. Heal the wounds of hatred and resentment that keep nations and individuals apart. Strengthen leaders and peacemakers who work tirelessly for understanding and dialogue. May the power of forgiveness and compassion transform hearts and lead to lasting reconciliation. We entrust to you *all* broken relationships and ask for your divine intervention in mending them. Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

Heavenly Father you are our refuge and strength, in times of trouble. We pray for all those who are sick and suffering. Ease their pain and grant them peace, let them feel your loving presence and know that you are walking beside them through this journey. We lift up those who are bereaved, whose hearts are heavy with loss and sorrow. Wrap them in your arms of love and provide the solace that only you can give. May they find strength in your presence, knowing that you weep with them in their pain. May they feel your nearness, and experience the healing balm of your grace. Lord in your mercy – **Hear our prayer**

As we conclude our prayers and as we step into the week ahead, may your presence go before us and guide our every step. Keep us grounded in your love and focused on your purpose for us. Grant us the grace to live out our faith in tangible ways, and may our lives be a living testimony to your goodness and grace. We entrust the days ahead to your care, knowing that you are with us always.

And we join all our prayers together in the words that Jesus taught us to say:

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

Our final hymn is 'Alleluia, alleluia, hearts to heaven and voices raise' to a wonderful tune composed by Sir Arthur Sullivan.

1 Alleluia, Alleluia!
hearts to heaven and voices raise;
sing to God a hymn of gladness,
sing to God a hymn of praise:
he who on the Cross a victim
for the world's salvation bled,
Jesus Christ the King of glory,
now is risen from the dead.

2 Christ is risen, Christ the first-fruits
of the holy harvest field,
which will all its full abundance
at his second coming yield;
then the golden ears of harvest
will their heads before him wave,
ripened by his glorious sunshine,
from the furrows of the grave.

3 Christ is risen, we are risen;
shed upon us heavenly grace,
rain and dew, and gleams of glory
from the brightness of thy face;
that we, with our hearts in heaven,
here on earth may fruitful be,
and by angel-hands be gathered,
and be ever, Lord, with thee.

4 Alleluia, Alleluia,
glory be to God on high;
Alleluia to the Saviour,
who has gained the victory;
Alleluia to the Spirit,
fount of love and sanctity;
Alleluia, Alleluia,
to the Triune Majesty.

Christopher Wordsworth (1807-1885)

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Ghost, be with us all, now and always. Amen.