

Morning Worship – Sunday 3rd January 2021 – Led by Niall Briggs

Call to Worship

Into the fresh ground of this New Year, we come to worship.

We come to listen to the stories and songs written before this time,

But we come to prepare for our time,

Not just to see the light, but to respond to it;

To accept our invitation

To be co-creators of a new story,

Co-writers of a new song.

Adopted through Christ into God's chosen family.

Hymn StF 346 *Christ is the world's light*

[<https://youtu.be/Tkmod9AW99s>]

1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
glory to God on high.
2. Christ is the world's peace, Christ and none other;
no one can serve him and despise another;
who else unites us, one in God the Father?
glory to God on high.
3. Christ is the world's life, Christ and none other;
sold once for silver, murdered here, our brother —
he, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
glory to God on high.
4. Give God the glory, God and none other;
give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
give God the glory, God with us, my brother:
glory to God on high.

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Introduction

This morning, we continue in some way, the theme of light that has been with us through Advent, moving on in John's prologue beyond the words we may have already heard this season and adding other voices that share John's confidence in the promise and hope that God brings to God's people.

Prayer of Adoration

As the days lengthen and we sense that Spring is on the way,
Something inside us stirs.

It reminds us that we are not in control,

We are not the centre or creator of the Universe.

That honour is yours alone, O God,

A light brighter than we can bear,

Words more profound than we can comprehend,

These are the gifts we find at our feet.

Not distant, but present;

Not aloof, but loving,

You come to us, with grace upon grace,

A living word, a light to guide us home. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession & Assurance

In our frailty and brokenness, we come knowing that some of our New Year's resolutions and longings have already fallen and slipped under the carpet.

We come, knowing that the past year has been hard, and we are afraid for the new one; our faith tested in unexpected ways.

In the shadow of much suffering – not just through the pandemic, but in the ongoing injustices of racism, poverty, and inequality; in our failure to deal with them, as well as other challenges to the wellbeing of the whole of creation, we come small and unsure.

We know that we are not responsible for all that is wrong, but we also know that we have played our part, however slightly and without malice.

Forgive us, God of light, for the ways in which we have wounded ourselves, others and the world.

Hear our confession O God, and cleanse our hearts and souls
So may the forgiveness of Christ renew us by your Spirit. **Amen.**

Reading Jeremiah 31: 7-14

Prayer of Lament & Petition

We recognise we are in a new time;
there has been change and we are uncomfortable.

Once we sang and hugged and kissed
and our friends were at our door and at our table.

But that is not where we are.

We have lost something; maybe someone.

We've prayed 'Your will be done' and 'let us be laid aside' or 'laid low for you'
And we thought we could pray with confidence.

And yet, despite signs of hope and growing confidence,
Today, we are still fragile and vulnerable.

We long for what we knew and how we were.
It was not the promised land, but we were happy there.

But we long too to follow Jesus,
To proclaim the name of Christ.

We remember he told us not to cling on, but to carry our cross.
We've heard that before and not understood.

As the year turns once more, calling us again to make our covenant with God,
We glimpse that it is your love, your confidence in us that makes it possible.

Be with us O God,
for we need you more than ever.

Be our hope O God,
That we may carry your light into the world to come.

Lord's Prayer

Reading Ephesians 1: 3-14

Reading John 1:1-18

Introduction

The prologue to John's Gospel is rightly known and loved in the traditional translations. But Greek word *Logos* would have so many more possible understandings than 'Word' in English. Whilst the overall message would be the same, different people with different traditions and cultural associations would have picked up different nuances. I've chosen a mix of translations: verses 1-14 are by Clive Scott who translated the passage based on an idea from Erasmus in 1516 that *logos* could be translated as *conversation*. The final part uses the Passion Translation – a fairly new translation which aims to help people hear the meaning of the text. This translates *logos* as *the Living Expression*.

John 1:1-14 (Clive Scott translation)

It all arose out of a conversation, conversation within God, in fact the conversation was God. So, God started the discussion, and everything came out of this, and nothing happened without consultation.

This was the life, life that was the light of men, shining in the darkness, a darkness which neither understood nor quenched its creativity.

John, a man sent by God, came to remind people about the nature of the light so that they would observe. He was not the subject under discussion, but the bearer of an invitation to join in. The subject of the conversation, the original light, came into the world, the world that had arisen out of his willingness to converse. He fleshed out the words but the world did not understand. He came to those who knew the language, but they did not respond. Those who did became a new creation (his children), they read the signs and responded.

These children were born out of sharing in the creative activity of God. They heard the conversation still going on, here, now, and took part, discovering a new way of being people.

To be invited to share in a conversation about the nature of life, was for them, a glorious opportunity not to be missed.

John 1:14-18 (The Passion Translation)

John taught the truth about him
when he announced to the people,
"He's the One! Set your hearts on him!
I told you he would come after me,
even though he ranks far above me,
for he existed before I was even born."

And now out of his fullness we are fulfilled!

And from him we receive grace heaped upon more grace!

Moses gave us the Law, but Jesus, the Anointed One,
unveils truth wrapped in tender mercy.

No one has ever gazed upon the fullness of God's splendour
except the uniquely beloved Son,
who is cherished by the Father
and held close to his heart.

Now he has unfolded to us
the full explanation of who God truly is!

Sermon *Songs of Hope and Promise*

From the dark days of the Exile to the more confident, if still fragile times of the early church, today's readings are all songs of hope and promise. They are also songs to and of their communities.

Jeremiah speaks words of restoration to the exiled remnant of Israel. No longer are they a people whose glory is clear for all to see, but carted off to work in a foreign country at the behest of their new rulers – their rules and their customs. They have done as Jeremiah and Ezekiel have suggested: settled, made the best of their situation including praying for their captors; but most of all, they have waited. And now Jeremiah is upbeat, hopeful – painting a picture of restoration – of gathering the scattered people of Israel back together. He paints a picture of a fruitful life together and people celebrating. However it actually turns out, Jeremiah recognises that there is an inner movement of the people that is just as important: to turn their mourning into joy, their sorrow into gladness.

We see that God leads and brings the people from the farthest places to somewhere they can call home. God ransoms and redeems both them and their situations, to gather them and bring them home. After a year when we have been simultaneously 'at home' and scattered from much of what we thought we know about it, this is a song of hope – maybe still on the wind and not yet come in to land, but it is there, nonetheless.

For many of us, 2020 was a year of exile – maybe exiles – and we were prevented from accessing our churches, loved ones, workplaces and more. And whilst there has been mourning, there has also been the answer to many prayers as needs have been met and neighbours shared their lives with each other in ways many of us have not witnessed before.

Today's encounter with Scripture – through prophets and apostles is a reminder of the nature of God – a God of hope and promise and grace upon grace.

But it's also a reminder that just as we need to hear that today, God's people have always needed to hear it. From all sorts of broken and fragile places, hope has always sprung.

After a year in which we may have wondered if praying the Covent Prayer last year was as wise as we hoped, with its call to surrender to God's will – in all that we do or may endure, when there is work or there is none, when we are troubled or at peace – we come again this month to that point of declaring "I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you as and where you choose ... you are mine and I am yours ...".

We may be wondering if now is the time to take a year off this prayer this time around, recognising the depth of the call that it embodies. Yet, the story of the Exile, including this week's snippet from Jeremiah, is a reminder that hope and promise spring from broken places, ours, and the worlds.

The call of God in these readings is to continue to have hope in the promises of God. John points to God via Jesus and calls us to witness – not just as observers, but as pointers-to as well. It is in our love and action that flow from the promises we have received from God that our witness can be seen and felt in what we do and say.

In describing Jesus as the *Logos* and being one with God, John isn't just making a play on a simple telling of Genesis of God speaking the world into being. In the Greek world, *logos* was a deep and complex idea as untranslatable as *shalom*. *Logos* is the living expression, a divine blueprint and conversation with and in God. In the world, Jesus is all these things and invites us into that conversation, to join in the song and learn to dance in the way of God's family.

Following Jesus isn't an interesting pastime. The invitation is to join in the *conversation*, to be part of an ongoing *living expression* of God's love and grace at work in the world. What we do and how we do it together matters. Just being good enough for our needs is not the church's calling, being a witness to a light both beyond and more intimate than all others is.

As we look around the Mission Area and wonder about the life of the people called Methodist in and around this city, what aspect of that living expression are we being called to embody? What conversations are we called to join in with or start afresh?

These are the sorts of ponderings that we will be exploring over the coming months as our mission planning exercise continues. The pandemic has multiplied some of the forces already present that we needed to address as well as adding others and creating new opportunities and blessings.

As we start a new year and ponder our calling and our prayers for the time to come, I encourage you to see the hope that the voices of the Bible call us to and talk together – and with me – about how we might join in with the ongoing creative work of being witnesses to the Divine light.

Hymn StF 660 *Called by Christ to be disciples*

[<https://youtu.be/l0QAkJrBLmw>]

1. Called by Christ to be disciples
every day in every place,
we are not to hide as hermits
but to spread the way of grace;
citizens of heaven's kingdom,
though this world is where we live,
as we serve a faithful Master,
faithful service may we give.
2. Richly varied are our pathways,
many callings we pursue:
may we use our gifts and talents
always, Lord, to honour you;
so in government or commerce,
college, hospice, farm or home,
whether volunteers or earning,
may we see your kingdom come.
3. Hard decisions may confront us,
urging us to compromise;
still obedience is our watchword —
make us strong and make us wise!
Secular is turned to sacred,
made a precious offering,
as our daily lives are fashioned
in submission to our King.

Martin Leckebusch (b. 1962) © 1999, Kevin Mayhew Ltd,
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Prayers of Intercession

As we come before God, to pray for the world, we come as part of a whole church that has prayed and continues to pray for the visible presence of God's kingdom on Earth. So, we bring the concerns of our hearts for those near and far before God.

As the Methodist Church in Bath, we recognise and pray for the many ways in which we are present, throughout the Mission Area – to each other and to the wider community:

- In the life of the six Methodist societies – Bathampton, Beechen Cliff, Box, Horizon and Nexus
- In other expressions of church – Messy Church, Muddy Church, Sunday Strolls, Starting Point
- In the life of the Chapel House community – the resident students and the wider community
- Through the work of chaplaincy – in the hospital, the universities, and Kingswood School
- Through the work of MHA – at Walcot Court and Stratton House: the residents and staff
- In the lives of our neighbours, colleagues, and friends
- In the work of the Southdown & Whiteway Community Partnership

- By meeting together in small groups – for study, conversation, or fellowship
- In the life of our premises users including other churches.

We ask for your presence and your grace in all our prayers and pray that we may listen to your call on us in response. **Amen.**

The Breakthrough Prayer

(A prayer for God to break through in the life of our churches)

God of love, God for all,

your purposes are more beautiful than we can possibly imagine.

Fill us with your Holy Spirit.

Help us let go of all that holds us back.

Open our lives and our churches to new seasons of humility and faith, of change and growth.

Shake us up with the Good News of Jesus and show us the way.

Amen.

Hymn StF 407 *Hear the call of the kingdom*

1. Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King;
let His song rise within you
as a fragrant offering
of how God, rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
all who trust in his unfailing grace.
2. Hear the call of the kingdom
to be children of light
with the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ;
walking justly before him,
loving all that is right,
that the life of Christ may shine
through us.

[\[https://youtu.be/stW18CNepgM\]](https://youtu.be/stW18CNepgM)

*King of heaven, we will answer the call,
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion, filled with power to
proclaim salvation in Jesus' name.*

3. Hear the call of the kingdom
to reach out to the lost,
with the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross,
bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come:
let the nations put their trust in him.

*King of heaven, we will answer the call,
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion, filled with power to
proclaim salvation in Jesus' name.*

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Blessing