

Sheffield United Reformed Churches Team Ministry
Worship for an individual or family - Sunday 19th July 2020 at 10:30 am.

Call to worship - (*Psalm 139: 23-24*)

Lord, examine me and know my heart; search me and know my thoughts;
Root out any offensive ways in me and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

Hymn

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
with gold of obedience and incense of lowliness, kneel and adore him the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness, high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
comfort your sorrows and answer your prayerfulness, guiding your steps as may best for you be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness of the poor wealth thou would'st reckon as thine;

Truth in its beauty and love in its tenderness these are the offerings to lay on his shrine

Prayer of worship, thanks and confession

Father of all, we worship you, as our RECONCILER. We praise you that your purpose for the whole of creation, and for all your children, is to bring about the unity of all things in heaven and on earth. We thank you that beneath the surface turmoil of political upheaval, national division, and international tension, your Spirit is at work in unseen ways - in individual hearts, in friendships and families, across the divides of denomination and faith, and in communities, nurturing love, compassion and understanding.

Jesus Christ, saviour of all, we worship you as our REDEEMER. On the cross you laid down your life, paying the price of our redemption to bring us back from a slavery to selfishness and sin. You adopted us as your legitimate children, with all the rights and the inheritance of those who truly belong to God's household, when we were born by the Holy Spirit, by whom we cry to you in prayer, "Abba Father"

Holy Spirit, who lives in all, we worship you as our RENEWER. Those who listen to your voice and are led by you are truly the children of God. You are the breath of God blowing like a wind through the whole of creation, which, itself, is longing to be released from its slavery to decay - watching for the children of God to hear the voice of the Spirit and obey his leading that we might bring your kingdom to reality.

So help us, Lord our God, in our worship to listen to your voice, RECONCILER, REDEEMER and RENEWER: to rise to new life and to bring your kingdom as we trust, as we work and as we pray. And so we pray together saying....**OUR FATHER...**



Readings

Psalm 139: 1-12

We are wonderfully created...

Romans 8: 12-25

Those who are led by the Holy Spirit are the children of God - and creation waits in eager expectation for us to come into our freedom...our freedom will set creation free.

Reflection on Rage and Redemption - by Professor Clyde Binfield

Lord, examine me and know my heart; search me and know my thoughts; Root out any offensive ways in me and lead me in the way that is everlasting. - Psalm 139, 23-4

Statues are the rage. At least, they are the objects of rage. But where do we stand with regard to them? The Puritan in me is dismissive. Surely there are more appropriate ways of celebrating the great and good? Then the cynic in me enjoys their inbuilt come-uppance (the sight of a seagull perched on a dignitaries' head!), and the tourist in me is grateful that they provide such helpful landmarks.

Edward Colston (1636-1721), his statue "erected by the citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most wise and virtuous sons of their city" is a reminder that in some cities you could not prosper from trade or industry without benefitting, however indirectly, from exploitation, indentured labour, slavery. So why a statue? Well, his philanthropy was lavish and lasting: alms-houses "for poor sailors" and "poor men", five hospitals (including Bart's) and schools that he made larger and larger - for boys and then girls. He gave a fortune to Queen Anne's Bounty to augment the livings of poor Anglican parsons. Hundreds had their lives touched, perhaps changed by his money.

Gruff and peremptory and something of a control-freak, perhaps the best you could say for Edward is that you knew where you stood with him; and perhaps some weight ought to be placed on his upbringing. His family suffered after backing the losing side in the Civil War. They bounced back with the Restoration and so he became a governor of a trading company set up by the new King's brother, James, Duke of York. And with that company, the Royal Africa Company, we come to our elephant in the room.

The foundation of his fortune lay in the West Indies and Bristol became, in his lifetime, Britain's leading slave port: 84,000 African slaves were shipped by him to the Americas; 19,000 died in the process. The figures are so large that they almost lose all meaning. He gave money to good causes but it was blood money. How can we weigh those thousands from Africa in any balance against hundreds in Bristol and elsewhere?

Those facts are blatant enough but their implications are yet more insidious – and more relevant to us because they make us all complicit. I want to suggest why.

Colston was a business man and today we would remind one such of his "duty of care" – but how new that duty (and, indeed that phrase). Until recently a businessman might have claimed his prime duty was to his shareholders. Colston's business bought property, and property was the foundation of society, conveying your right to vote, your stake in society, a chance of good marriage. Slaves were property. Slavery could only be abolished, slaves could only be redeemed, if large sums were paid to those who owned such property. Slavery was part of the warp and woof of our business-like and property-based empire. So it had been, only far more, in the Roman Empire. And that, though providing no excuse, is very much to my point.

Had Colston, so devoted to the Church, never encountered Paul's letter to Philemon? Had he never been struck by Paul's colour-blindness when it came to race? Or at least been struck by that key concept in the Gospels, REDEMPTION - which is incomprehensible without understanding the transforming distinction between bond and free in the Roman world? Slavery was a scriptural fact but it was the hallmark of a fallen world, contravening the wholeness of creation. Was nothing at work to suggest otherwise?

Colston's statue was toppled because of Black Lives Matter. Now black lives matter, not because all lives matter (though they do) and not even because lives matter (though they do) but because each life matters. A grasp of that fact was perhaps the greatest spiritual insight of the century in which Colston died. It was an insight recaptured by that evangelical revival which gripped Bristol as it gripped Sheffield and countless other places, and it enabled William Wilberforce to pursue his campaign against slavery. Because each single life matters in the eye of eternity – no ifs, no buts, as a politician might say – its redemption (what a suggestive word, given its roots in a slave-holding age) is the prime, urgent, spiritual duty. Such redemption must become a fact, and the achievement of that fact is bound to be a political act because the ultimate well-being of society depends on it.

The spirit we received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into our lives again; it is the spirit of sons and daughters ... (Romans 8, 15)

"I know that my Redeemer lives" written by Handel in Colston's lifetime; generations later those words were sung in what used to be known as Bristol's Colston Hall. What a long, relentlessly necessary, urgent, work is redemption in our riven, fallen world. Colston's statue cannot now be returned to its plinth in that Bristol square, but I hope that the plinth will be retained, to remind us perhaps of when and why statues were the rage but certainly of the place of redemption in our riven world.

Creation still retains the hope of being freed like us, from its slavery to decay - to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God ... (Romans 8, 21).

Hymn

All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.

God's great goodness aye endureth, deep his wisdom, passing thought:
splendour, light, and life attend him, beauty springeth out of naught.
Evermore from his store new-born worlds rise and adore.

Daily doth the Almighty giver bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth, pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand; joy doth wait on his command.

A Prayer of Confession and Intercession

Father of all, we ask your forgiveness for our failure to discern and strive within your purpose to bring unity and reconciliation to all things.

Jesus, our Redeemer, set us free from the bondage that has come to us through the sins of past ages and our own sins in the present time that we may have a new vision of a creation set free from slavery to our own sin and those of others.

So, Holy Spirit, help us, in our circle of power and influence, and help all people of good-will who govern and exercise power and influence in their turn, to be so led by You, that we may work for peace, justice, for understanding and unity and for kindness and healing in our families, our neighbourhoods, in our nation and our world.

And, as we pray, we remember those on our hearts and minds who are in particular need (*name people you are concerned before God about here...*) - and we ask your rich blessing upon them and upon ourselves as we bless your creation...

A Blessing

Made in His image, Redeemed by His Son, Led by His Spirit, Be blessed as God's children.