

**Sheffield United Reformed Churches Team Ministry**  
**Worship for individuals or families - Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020 at 10:30 am.**

**Call to worship**

Christ calls us into community, to live and work together for the building of his kingdom. Fill our hearts with a passion for the journey, a longing to learn more of you, and a desire to share our journey and the Good news of your kingdom with others. Come now, Holy Spirit and breathe on us as we worship.

**Hymn R&S 567**

Your hand, O God, has guided your flock from age to age;  
your faithfulness is written on history's open page.  
Our fathers owned your goodness, and we their deeds record;  
and both to this bear witness: one church, one faith, one Lord!

Your mercy will not fail us nor leave your work undone;  
with your right hand to help us the victory shall be won.  
And then by earth and heaven your name shall be adored;  
and this shall be our anthem: one church, one faith, one Lord!

**Prayers of Approach and Thanksgiving**

O Lord our God, we sometimes tremble as we think of who we are and who you are. Bring us now, in this moment, to know you. See us as we are, and see our yearning to be more like you.

May we lay aside anything that hinders our journey with you all the challenges which pull us this way and that. We praise you, our loving God, for creating an earth with enough room for everyone, where nature sustains environments of harmony and balance, where new life springs out of death and decay, where adaptation, transitions and change bring new possibilities.

We praise you, our loving God, for the gift of your Son identified with our humanity, who welcomes the outcast, the stranger and the lost, who does not see the world as we see it, but proclaims peace and justice for all.

We sometimes find it hard, in the heat of the moment, to know what is right and what is wrong. Forgive us for our failings and wrongdoings. Forgive our insensitivities, forgive us when we refuse to change. Forgive anything that cuts us off from each other or from you. Jesus said 'See, I am making all things new'. Open our eyes and our ears as we look to you for mercy and forgiveness. Hear our call, these prayers to offer to you. Amen



**Readings**

**Exodus 12:1-14** - Israel celebrates Passover, anticipating their Exodus

**Psalms 149** - praise to God who leads us in victory

**Acts 7 and 9** - The martyrdom of Stephen and the conversion of Saul

**Reflection** - *Times of Transition* by Stephen Atkinson (Central)  
LIFE a transitional arrangement between birth and death

We find ourselves in a period of transition, no I am not talking about coming out of lockdown rather I am talking about Brexit, a topic that would have been high on our agenda had the Coronavirus not come along and knocked us all off course. It is a fact that we shall be leaving the European Union at 11pm GMT on 31<sup>st</sup> December this year and all the public wrangling on whether we leave with a deal or not have been pushed far out of our thoughts.

Having officially agreed and accepted that we are to leave our brothers and sisters in Europe, this year is supposed to be a year of transition where we wheel and deal and that at the point of officially leaving the European Union we will have struck a trade deal for our future years outside Europe or not. It is supposed to be the year that we get our heads around being a sovereign nation again, the United Kingdom, Great Britain, the British Isles whatever title we want to use, once again we will stand on our own.

Little did we know that lurking in the wings and hidden from our view of the world was a silent invisible assassin. With such devastation this assassin has reached out across the globe and struck down hundreds of thousands of innocent victims. It has not distinguished between young or old, rich or poor or even ethnic origins.

We enjoyed Christmas last year and the festive spirit of moving into this New Year. Within a couple of months our world was turned upside down and inside out and we find ourselves very much in a totally different world. Instead of confidence, certainties, looking forward with faith to new economic opportunities and new beginnings we have fear, uncertainty, many social, political and economic boundaries and restrictions in place.

The freedoms that we have for so long taken for granted, severely curtailed and for many of us the feelings of being imprisoned in our own homes – LOCKDOWN.

Now we are emerging from Lockdown, slowly uncertainly, trying to put on a brave face and telling ourselves that everything is alright now and everything will be back to normal. But what was normal and what will normal be now.

The Old Testament gives us the account of Moses leading the oppressed peoples of Israel out from under the noses of their Egyptian overlords. They too were looking forward with confidence, certainties and the promise of new beginnings. They had faith in Moses, a man who God had called to lead them to a new land where they could live as free people in charge of their own lives and customs, all they had to do was follow him.

As we know the reality behind the seemingly simple journey was anything but. It took many years to achieve the goal of that journey because God wanted to guide and educate them so that when the final destination was reached they were a people who understood what was needed for them to build their own ordered society. They were fit for purpose, not just a nation of people who had followed a man to a new land only to ask okay we have arrived, what happens next?, what do we do now?. They had undergone a transition from simply being a nation of people who followed Moses because God had said so to a nation of people who knew who they were able to govern themselves, make laws and to prosper in a well ordered manner according to their customs and religious beliefs in what would be their new normal.

In the Acts of the Apostles we are given the story of how whilst going about their preaching and ministry they were much persecuted and we are introduced to one among their number named Saul. He was a man acting as an agent of the authorities who still saw the teachings of Christ as blasphemous and attacked arrested and threatened those who would follow such teachings and in extreme cases kill those who were deemed to be leaders of such outrage. And so it was that a man named Stephen came to the fore, a believer, a man richly blessed by God who gave powerful speeches in contradiction of the religious teachings of the Jewish High Priests.

They brought Stephen before the council to answer for his teachings and to extract perhaps a measure of guilt and an asking for forgiveness. However Stephen's faith and commitment to the teachings of Christ were so powerful that his words were just too much for the council to hear and they dragged him outside and stoned him to death. Saul was present and approved of what he had witnessed.

Saul continued in his sworn efforts to destroy the church and dragged many believers from their homes and put them in prison. The story well told is that whilst on the road to Damascus Saul and

his entourage witnessed a blinding flash of light. Saul closing his eyes in defence of this blinding flash and that when he opened his eyes he could not see, he was blind. This man of terrible might and terror to those who believed in Christ was suddenly a man of weakness, he needed help to know where he was, and needed someone to now lead him on the rest of his journey. God spoke to Saul and his men also heard the voice and led Saul into Damascus as they were instructed and left him in a dwelling there.

A man name Ananias was tasked by God to look after Saul and after some days he was instructed by God to lay his hands on Saul's eyes and Saul's sight was restored. During his period of blindness God had been in Saul's mind and heart and had spoken to him at length. On regaining his sight Saul went out to preach and saying that Jesus was the Son of God. Many who knew Saul could not believe that the man who several days earlier had persecuted such people was now giving voice in defence of the beliefs of those he had so cruelly imprisoned.

Saul was guided by God and sought to gain the trust of the disciples who at first were very sceptical and wanted nothing to do with him. He became probably their most well-known disciple helping to establish the early church in many regions of the area and writing many letters of encouragement and enlightenment to those early Christians.

Along the way Saul became known as Paul, a man who underwent his own transition from that of a destroyer of the early church to a builder and foundation stone of that same church.

We are in September and nearing a natural transition of the seasons from Summer to Autumn, we notice a change in the weather, it starts to get darker earlier and school children and students return to schools, colleges and universities. How strange this latter element will seem. Coronavirus has disrupted our education facilities with many of them being closed and our children/young people having to be schooled at home. We send our young people back to their educational facilities with a mixture of emotions, for some it will be a time of excitement, getting to see old classmates and friends again after not seeing them for several months.

For others, including parents a time of anxiety as to whether it is safe to send their children back into the classroom. For teachers too, a time of trepidation as many are not convinced that going back into a full classroom of pupils is the safest thing to do at the moment given that the virus is still out there.

And so we return to the here and now, normality restored? I think not. There are restrictions still in place in so many areas of our social fabric with lockdowns being announced weekly in different regions counties and nations within our United Kingdom. The global picture is a map of uncertainty, some countries coping better than others with the pandemic and other countries not just ours experiencing reoccurring spikes. Over us all is the shadow of a second wave of this deadly virus.

New normal is a phrase that is now in our everyday vocabulary and in our social, spiritual, and political psyche and we want to project our hope and our faith that this new normal will be not long coming. Many have postponed holidays, weddings and other important family occasions until next year in the hope that new normal will have arrived by then.

Our transition from normal to new normal is far from complete, but we have to face what is left of it in the knowledge that God is with us. We have to look to our hearts and minds and listen to what he is saying to us and we have to respond as he would want us to do. We have to be more so attentive to the needs and concerns of others but at the same time we must be mindful of our own safety.

Let us go forward with faith, with hope and an ever increasing certainty that our world has changed, our normal has changed but God's relationship with us has not changed. Our earthly lives are a transitional arrangement from birth to death but life with God is a non-transitional arrangement from birth through life everlasting.

## **Communion**

Jesus said: I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Anyone who comes to me I will never turn away.

The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ. The cup of blessing which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ. Come let us share with one another in community.

*Let us break and eat bread and then drink wine (or a suitable alternative) - with thankful hearts*

Lord, we thank and praise you that, through the Passover of your Son Jesus, Christ upon the cross, we have passed from death to life.

## **Prayers of Intercession**

God our Father and Mother of creation, we pray for those who this day need our prayers:

those we see around us...

those we have left at home...

family and friends near and far...

strangers and communities we will never meet or know,

but whose peril we hear of and see on our screens...

those whose life is ebbing away

consumed by old age, frailty, illness or neglect...

those who grieve deeply for lives and loves lost...

those who cause grief and chaos in society

and who live seemingly with different values from ours, for them and their victims and their families...

those who are forgotten, unnoticed, unloved, unmissed...

Lord God, in your abundance of mercy, hear these and all our prayers.

Loving God, you have made us for peace and for friendship,

but everywhere we see conflict and dissension. Fill our hearts with a deep desire for peace,

and inspire us to work for a fair world where your peace, justice and righteousness will flow.

Lift us above, the fear which holds us back and open our mouths and may our actions confess you to the world.

## **Hymn R&S 663**

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.

Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit into every troubled breast!

Let us all in Thee inherit; let us find the promised rest.

Take away the love of sinning; Alpha and Omega be;

end of faith, as its beginning, set our hearts at liberty.

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.

## **Blessings**

As we conclude this time ....

Go, for you have Good News to share.

Go, in the name of Jesus who is ahead of us preparing the way.

Go, in the name of the Creator who is making all things new.

Go, in the power of the Spirit, who frees us to serve.