

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individuals or families

Sunday 14th February 2021 at 10:30 am
Racial Justice Sunday

Call to worship:

From a cloud, and in a crowd, God speaks to us.
Calling us to be lovers of justice, equality and freedom.
On mountaintops, and in neighbourhoods, Christ calls to us.
With a word, and with wonder, moulding us into who we are.
On Zoom, and in the quiet moments, the Spirit whispers in our hearts.
Gathering up our fears and, as well as our dreams, and offering them to God.

Opening hymn: R&S 200

The kingdom of God is justice and joy; for Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory in Jesus we know; and here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God is mercy and grace; the captives are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share; and hope is awakened in place of despair.

Opening prayer

God of all creation, you have made **all** people in your image.
And you call us to worship you.
We come to you in all our diversity in Sheffield and beyond
young and old, black and white, rich and poor, male and female –
and everything in between
because we know we are all invited to be part of your beloved community.

Thank you for your unconditional love to us, Revealed in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

O Holy One, on mountaintops and valley floors you reveal to us the light of your love.
Our hearts desire is to bask in the amazing glory of the divine presence.
With each encounter we are changed and transformed.
May we walk among our siblings and friends as a blessing,
Bearing light into dark places, hope to displace despair, and love that casts out hate.

Draw us nearer, O Holy One Help us, to live our lives as a reflection of your love.
Our world is hurting and we need the followers of Jesus to follow more closely.
Maybe then we will hear your voice speaking to us and saying...
"listen to my Child, the Beloved!"

Forgive us, God, When we fail to listen to your voice, leading and guiding us,
shake us from our apathy, move us from our indifference displace us from our discrimination.
When we reject those who are not like us— those who think differently, those who act differently,
those who speak differently.

We forget that all are your beloved children, and neglect your call to love one another.
Embolden us in the creation of a world
where all races, gender identities, sexualities, abilities
know that each and every one of us is part of your beloved community.
Amen

Bible readings



2 Kings 2, 1-12 - Elijah takes his leave of Elisha

Psalms 50, 1-6 - God gathers His people to Himself

Mark 9, 2-9 - Jesus' face takes on a different complexion

2 Corinthians 4, 3-6 – The glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus

Reflection

Today, we mark the Transfiguration. Transfiguration — that mysterious transformation of vision in Jesus and the disciples. A transformation in vision that is narrated in Mark's gospel and that our Junior Church acted out for us. A transformation which is a radical, new way of seeing ourselves. A radical, new way of seeing one another. A radical, new way of loving ourselves and one another.

The Dutch priest and professor, Henri Nouwen declares that we need to recognise: "the sacred voice that calls us the "Beloved." Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

We all need to be reminded that we are the beloved sons and daughters of God over and over again because we are living in a world that often tends to reject us for who we are or can make us feel less than who we are. We can live in a world that often rejects us or discriminates based on core aspects of our identity: our race, our gender identity, our sexuality, our abilities.

When Jesus reaches the summit of the mountain, in Mark's gospel that our Junior Church acted out for us, this morning: Beloved is what greets him. When he turns his dazzling light toward the wilderness: Beloved is what goes with him. As the white light blazes all around Him, Beloved is what settles into his awareness, his bones, his being.

It feels important we notice that before Jesus entered the wilderness, as He will at the start of Lent next week, he did not go without a blessing; he did not venture into that terrain, without hearing himself named Beloved. During this pandemic, it can feel like we are experiencing a prolonged period in the wilderness. The wilderness of spending a lot of time in our homes, unable to be with family and friends, unable to enjoy certain activities and shops, unable to do what we 'normally' do.

Yet in this wilderness, as we recognised, acknowledged and declared at Christmas – Emmanuel – God with us. God with us in the isolation. God with us in our loss and sickness. God with us in the vaccines. God with us, whispering in our ear: "You are my beloved."

When Jesus comes striding back out of the wilderness, His belovedness blazes within Him; the desert has seared it into Him. Whatever else has passed in these forty days and forty nights, He leaves the wilderness with this gift. He knows who He is and what He is here to do: to be belovedness embodied, and to bear this love into the world.

And for us, called to be the body of Christ: what might such a journey do for us, and in us, and through us? As we enter our own Lenten landscape, we, too, should not begin this journey without a blessing; we should not miss hearing Beloved sounding in our ear. The message that each and every person, each and every life and part of this earth is beloved.

At times I may feel small, old, broken, useless, a failure...but looked at in God's eyes, there is so much more to my being and life. It is true of every person and each part of creation; we are all Beloved. Let that sink in - Our Creator God made each one of us in God's image. Our affirming God made each one of us in and for Love.

What would it be like to see ourselves as God sees us? As God sees each and every one of us as deeply loved.

What would it be like to see each of us: every human being as loved by God?

Throughout the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s Martin Luther King, questioned the current inequality and injustice of segregation. And his prayers and actions centred on a 'Beloved Community', a society built on justice, equality and freedom for ALL God's people. After the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in speaking about the larger movement toward which they were building, Dr. King said: "the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends.... It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men [and women]."

Like Jesus, Martin Luther King, recognised and acknowledged the belovedness of all people. A belovedness which I wonder, What would a 'Beloved Community' look like in 2021?

What would it mean for us globally, nationally and locally?

These questions feel all the more pressing as we continue to live in a country where injustice and inequality persists. In a country where young Black British males being more likely to go to prison than university. In a world where people of black and south Asian ethnic background have a greater risk of death from COVID than white people.

And yet, steps are being taken to embody God's love by tackling racial injustice. Locally, last year, the University of Sheffield employed students as Racial Equality Champions in order to challenge racist language on campus. Globally, the Black Lives Matter movement continues to protest against incidents of police brutality and all racially motivated violence.

What could we do in our churches?

On this last Sunday of Epiphany, just before we enter the long season of Lent, a season of focus and concentration, let us stop to notice what matters most in life. Let each of us turn aside to receive the blessing of the present moment; name our intention to turn to God, consent to be stripped of what distracts us, and prevents us being aware of God's surrounding, all-encompassing love.

So, as we go out this week and enter the season of Lent, I invite us to recognise, acknowledge and articulate God's love in all we say and do for ourselves and for each other so, God's kingdom may come - Amen.

Hymn for reflection (R&S 204)

O vision blest of heavenly light, Which meets the three disciples' sight,
When on the holy mount they see their Lord's transfigured majesty.

More bright than day his raiment shone; the Father's voice proclaimed the Son
Belov'd before the worlds were made, for us in mortal flesh arrayed.

O Light from light, by love inclined, Jesu, redeem all humankind,
Accept thy people's prayer and praise which on the mount to thee they raise.

Be with us, Lord, as we descend to walk with thee to journey's end,
That through thy cross we too may rise, and share thy triumph in the skies.

To thee, O Father; Christ, to thee, let praise and endless glory be,
With whom the Spirit we adore, one Lord, one God, for evermore.

Prayers of intercession

At Junior Church last week, we learnt about how, during the early 1960s, Martin Luther King and in his family often went on holiday to Jamaica. Dr King was really impressed with Jamaica's coat of arms – 'out of many, one people' – which was a symbol of the unity of the different cultures, peoples living in that country and something very similar to his vision of the 'Beloved Community'.

This vision of a 'Beloved Community' was for a world built on justice, equality, freedom and love for ALL God's people.

So, for our service this week, our Junior Church wrote our prayers for people and situations where there is a need for justice, equality, freedom and love, in our lives, country and world.

God of Justice, you teach us about opening doors and opportunities for everyone. Help us to be open-minded and caring to all we meet. We pray for a world where there is no segregation, no prejudice. God of justice, help us create justice for all.

God of Equality, you teach us about allowing people to be themselves. Help us to treat people as we want to be treated ourselves. We pray for a world where there is no discrimination, no racism. God of equality, help us create equality for all.

God of Freedom, you teach us about breaking down bars holding people in or keeping people out. Help us to make sure people have rights and respect. We pray for a world where there is no wrongful arrest, no unfair imprisonments. We pray especially for Aung San Suu Kyi in Myanmar and Alexei Navalny in Russia. God of freedom, help us create freedom for all.

God of Love, you teach us about loving our neighbours and enemies. Help us so that we don't hurt peoples' feelings and we're not mean. We pray for a world where there is no hate, no unkindness. God of love, help us create love for all.

O God, inspire us to create beloved communities. We know that this work is hard, like loving our enemies. But we know that, with you, and through our prayers and action, we can create a world built on justice, equality and freedom for all God's people. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Invocation for Lent from the Iona Community

Into a dark world a snowdrop comes a blessing of hope and peace carrying within it a green heart symbol of God's renewing love.

Come to inhabit our darkness Lord Christ for dark and light are alike to you.

May nature's white candles of hope remind us of your birth and lighten our journey through Lent and beyond. Amen

Hymn R&S 625

God of freedom, God of justice, you whose love is strong as death,
you who saw the dark of prison, you who knew the price of faith --
touch our world of sad oppression with your Spirit's healing breath.

Rid the earth of torture's terror, you whose hands were nailed to wood;
hear the cries of pain and protest, you who shed the tears and blood --
move in us the power of pity restless for the common good.

Blessing

May God, Present to John, James and Peter at the mountaintop.
Present to us in one another today, in our communities and our world.
Uphold and strengthen us with courage.

And bless us with vision and hope to continue to see the light and to continue to be the light for one another and all around us. This day and always. **Amen.**