

Sheffield United Reformed Churches
Team Ministry worship for individual or family
Sunday 21st March 2021 at 10:30 am.
5th Sunday in Lent

Call to worship

Jesus says: "The Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus says: "When you lift up the Son of Man, you will know that 'I am who I am'"

Jesus says: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me". (*John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32*)

Hymn R&S 30

Father, we love you. We worship and adore you. Glorify your name in all the earth.
Glorify your name. Glorify your name. Glorify your name in all the earth

Jesus, we love you. We worship and adore you. Glorify your name in all the earth
Glorify your name

Prayers of Approach, Confession and Thanksgiving

Loving God, Father and Mother of us all we give you thanks and praise for this new day. We think to ourselves how your heart must break at the suffering you see. The changes we have made to your world, the damage to the environment around us and the broken relationships we have caused through not loving each other.

God of boundless mercy and unfailing love, our Creator, saviour and redeemer, as part of the body of Christ around the world, as people called to live for you in the families and communities and networks in which you have placed us, we gather virtually together to worship you: to proclaim your goodness and to offer our thanks and praise.

Meet us here, we pray. Join our hearts in wholehearted worship. Breathe your word into our souls; engrave your covenant of grace into our minds and hearts. Cultivate your character in us, inspire and shape us, unite and encourage us, that our lives may reflect your love and justice to the world.

We fear the unknown path, the conflict and division. We fear the sacrifices we will be asked to make. Forgive when our faith seems weak and we are uncertain about the way you want us to go. Forgive us when we fail to speak out.

Grant us forgiveness and assurance that our sins are forgiven, through the death of our Lord Jesus. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, and sustain in us a willing spirit. Amen



Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34 – God is making a new covenant

Psalms 51:1-12 - Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

John 12:20-33 - Father, glorify your name.

Hebrews 5:5-10 - Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered

Reflection by Rev Jamie Kissack

If you are every tempted to watch the credits of a film to the end (not something we often do!), what is one of the last roles to be listed? After the actors, the makeup artists, the camera operators – come the ‘The Runners’. The very bottom rung of the film industry. The people who pass on messages, go on errands, chauffeur – in other words, a general dogs-bodies.

You could see the role played by Philip and Andrew in today’s reading as a similarly unglamorous role in the drama of the Gospel as they are the ones approached by ‘The Greeks’ who want to see Jesus. And together, they dutifully take the request to Jesus.

And it’s not the first time they have been the ‘Runners’, or the ‘Go-Betweens’. Think of John’s story of the call of the disciples, when Philip and Andrew are each involved in bringing Peter and Nathanael to Jesus. Or in the feeding of the 5000, when they both appear in the conversation with Jesus about how the people are going to be fed.

For all that it might seem to be the most mundane of roles, I want to suggest that it is actually the highest calling – to be the go-betweens who help others to ‘See Jesus!’

Let’s notice how, in John’s story, the two situations between which the two disciples stand are loaded with symbolism.

From whom are Philip and Andrew getting the request? From some Greeks who are coming up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This is the first mention of Greeks in John’s gospel, and they are probably gentile Greeks – perhaps God-fearers. In other words, these are the first people to come looking for Jesus who are not Jews, and who are therefore representing that world beyond Israel. This is a strong hint of a universal mission for the church – one which will only really take shape after the resurrection.

If you track back just one verse before today’s reading began, you will read that in response to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on a donkey (the Palm Sunday story), the Pharisees complain to one another that ‘You can see that we are getting nowhere [in opposing Jesus]; *all the world* has gone after him!’

The Greeks, then, represent all the world, which desires or needs to ‘See Jesus.’ This is a big deal! What an astonishing opportunity! To whom are Philip and Andrew taking their message? Well to Jesus, of course.

But this is Jesus presented to us in a most challenging way. This is Jesus, the one acutely aware of his own impending death, troubled of soul (as he is in the other Gospels in Gethsemane). This is Jesus using the gospel language of the seed that must die to live – the most challenging image that Jesus uses. And this is Jesus, referencing God’s judgement – never a very comfortable subject!

Above all, this is Jesus whose ‘hour has come’. Since the beginning of John’s Gospel this moment has been anticipated. Well now it is here – with all the paradoxical imagery of Jesus being ‘lifted up’ – the glory of God displayed in the moment of crucifixion on a Roman cross.

If the ‘Greeks who want to see Jesus’ represent the astonishing opportunity, the picture of Jesus represents the formidable challenge acceptance of the Gospel entails.

What can we say of their role as go-betweens?

- Their role is certainly not to point to themselves. We learn virtually nothing about Philip and Andrew’s own reactions and contribution to the story beyond being the messengers.

- Their role is certainly not to get their own agenda across - to win an advantage, let's say, for themselves in God's sight.
- And their role is not to act like priests, who mediate the message of Jesus. Rather, their task is to help the Greeks to see Jesus for themselves.

So can we see something of our own calling in this go-between model of discipleship?

During my ministry I have found myself in conversations with people who might be trying out the church to which I minister for the first time. New faces will always stir hope in our hearts, of course! It is a rare enough experience these days! Full of that awareness of a need for a careful balance between enthusiastic welcome, and respectful space-giving.

One thing I have always tried to do in this situation – and always tried to do with sincerity – is to encourage people not to feel guilty in 'doing the rounds' of the other local congregations (which is probably what they are going to do anyway). I try to prioritize, above my own heartfelt desire that they join *my* church, the desire that they find the right place for a spiritual home where they can exercise their discipleship of Jesus. As Go-betweens, it's more about Jesus than it is about church. It's more about the one coming to us with the request than it is about us and our ambitions.

I was once on my way to a conference at the URC's Windermere Centre (now sadly closed). If you know the journey, you will know that the last step of the train journey was from Oxenholme to Windermere on a local train. I was travelling alone, and to a conference where I knew hardly anyone. As I sat by myself on the noisy train, above the hubbub of the passenger conversation, I could hear one word clearly stand out again and again: '...Church..., ...church..., ...church...' It made me think how it must seem to those on the outside that so much of our conversation in the church is about the church. If so, we are not being very good go-betweens.

As we prepare for the journey out of pandemic lockdown – which we hope and pray is coming onto our horizon – can we make sure that our conversation is less about us, the church, and more about Jesus? Let's be the go-betweens for those who 'want to see Jesus'.

Song for Reflection R&S 636

The Church of Christ in every age;
Beset by change but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage; and keep on rising from the dead.

Across the world, across the street;
the victims of injustice cry;
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live until they die.

Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be;
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.

Prayers of Intercession

We pray:

Your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.

May this be our prayer for the church

As we look on a church beset by division

As we look on a church which struggles to make its voice heard

As we look on a church which lacks confidence

as we think about your call to unity

as we think about our call to be the servant church

as we think about our own discipleship

We pray: Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

May this be our prayer for one another
as we experience the pain and suffering of the world
as we think of people we know whose lives are not as we would like them to be
as we bring to mind the names of individuals known to us...

as we think of the responsibilities that are in our hands,
as we think about the lives we touch directly,
the gift of love that is ours to share, we recall the names of those on our hearts....

We pray: Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
In the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth.

Hymn R&S 509

O Jesus, I have promised; To serve thee to the end;
Be thou forever near me, My Master and my friend;
I shall not fear the battle If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway If thou wilt be my guide.

O let me feel thee near me! The world is ever near:
I see the sights that dazzle, the tempting sounds I hear.
My foes are ever near me, around me and within;
But, Jesus, draw thou nearer, And shield my soul from sin.

O let me hear thee speaking In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion, The murmurs of self-will.
O speak to reassure me, to hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen, Thou guardian of my soul.

Blessing

May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith;
May you be rooted and grounded in love;
May you seek the face of Jesus and show others where to find his grace.

May the blessing of God, the Creator,
Jesus the Son
and the Holy Spirit
be with you now and forever more. Amen