

**Sheffield United Reformed Churches**  
**Team Ministry worship for individuals or a family**  
**Sunday 8th August 2021 at 10:30 am.**

**Call to worship (John 6, 51)**

Jesus said: I am the living bread, bringing the life of Heaven. Whoever feeds on this bread will have life! This bread is my body, given for the life of the world

**Hymn R&S 34**

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!  
Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee;  
holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness hide thee,  
though the eye made blind by sin thy glory may not see,  
only thou art holy; there is none beside thee, perfect in power, in love, and purity.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!  
All thy works shall praise thy name, in earth and sky and sea;  
holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty, God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

**Opening Prayer**

Thank you for the light of this new day and we praise you that we can gather together virtually (and in person) to share this time of worship.

Thank you for your love for us which gives us reassurance that all your promises are true and everlasting. You are there when we fail and when we succeed, and if we seek you in all we do we know that all other things will be added in our lives. Thank you gracious, God

God of the poor and friend of the weak, you have the bread of life for the hungry and living water for the thirsty. We come hungry and thirsty for your word, with a desire to know your will and to love with your unconditional love. Help us in this time of worship to be fed and to learn from you.

Eternal God, for the times we have failed to share you (our bread) with others and in our dealing with others we do not shine your light for them to see. Forgive our lack of mercy, and our readiness to condemn others. Keep us gentle but firm when issues of justice and truth asks us to speak up and speak out for the marginalised in our community. Forgive us, Lord. Give us patience, make us abounding in love in the knowledge that we can wait up on you and our strength will be renewed.

Spirit of God, inspire us that we maybe steadfast in our hearing, in our speaking, in our believing, and our living. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that everyone who has faith and believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. So to all of us who repent and believe, we can say that we are forgiven, through the love of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Come Holy Spirit, Come Holy Spirit and wash over us a new. May this time of worship be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear. Amen

## Readings:



**2 Samuel 18: 5-33** - David's heart is broken by the rebellion and death of Absalom

**Psalms 130** - God answers out of the depths...

**John 6:35, 41-51** - Jesus, The living Bread of Heaven

**Ephesians 4:25 - 5, 2** - Four changes that happen in a Christian life

## Reflection

*It's the presence of Your Spirit Lord we need...It's the presence of Your Spirit Lord we love;  
For the moving of Your Spirit Lord we pray!*

In January of this year I became a grandfather (Have I told you that before?) There she is in the picture - Rowan Grace Sullivan (Born 28.1.21 at 9:48pm. Weighing 8.6lbs)

Because of lockdown, we have only seen her twice in the flesh; the first time about two months ago and then in the middle of July. It was amazing how much she had grown between those two occasions - turning from a baby into the beginning of a little girl. But why am I amazed? She is alive and it's the natural thing for living things to grow. They just do - because they have LIFE within them.

So, I begin with a very difficult question. Has Jesus, who describes Himself as the Bread of LIFE, "moved on" (John 6:35)? Elvis has "left the building" - has Jesus left the Church? Sometimes it feels like it. Oh, yes we have good services, interesting reflections and studies and it's certainly good to meet but, sometimes, *"It's the presence of His Spirit, I love...I need!*

The context of our Gospel reading, in John's Gospel, shows Jesus leaving the crowd behind (John 6: 15) - withdrawing His presence, even after the amazing miracle of feeding a hungry multitude of poor and ordinary folk. The old *King James Version* uses the word "departed" *The Message* version says He "slipped off" - *The Wycliffe* translation says He "flew"!

Preparing for our Mission and Care meeting last week, I browsed through the reports of this year's URC General Assembly. Much was good in the calls for action on many social and political issues. But much was missing. Nowhere, apart from brief references in the Moderator's Report, did I find the Church addressing our seeming spiritual malaise: Our total membership has declined by 17% in the last five years. A similar trajectory will take us to a total national membership of just 17,000 people in another five years and this could accelerate! In the Yorkshire Synod, six of our 95 churches have closed this year. Another 18 are likely to close in the next five years - a quarter of our churches will disappear!

The situation is more complex, of course. Numbers can hide what is really going on and Membership is not the only measure of growth. Numbers are not everything and there are signs of life. In fact, our life of service and discipleship should be a great attractor for new people. But without people, how will that great work continue? A living organism will be a growing organism but by many measures we are not alive but dead.

All of which makes me ask the very hard question: has the risen Lord Jesus, the glorious LIVING bread, departed? Dare we write "ICHABOD" (meaning: "the glory has departed") across our doors? Jesus left the crowd because He knew that they intended to take Him by force and make Him king. Has the mainstream Church, in the Western World, taken Jesus and made Him the puppet head of a political movement? It feels like it sometimes.

Jesus had just fed a hungry crowd. No wonder people's hope in His potential to change things, politically, was aroused. But Jesus withdrew and wasted a massive opportunity. Why? It's a tough question but His words in our reading from John give us a clue: "I am the living bread, bringing the life of Heaven. Whoever feeds on this bread will have life! This bread is my body, given for the life of the world." (John 14:51).

Jesus knew that the world needed something much deeper than short-term political change. It needed radical heart change that got to the roots of our human malaise. Jesus knew that we needed more than superficial change - he needed to get to the roots of our sin (the word "radical" comes from the Latin *radix*, meaning "root."). He had to fulfil His destiny to go to Jerusalem and give His body (the Bread of Life) for the world. He knew we needed a death and resurrection! And so, like the Psalmist, we are able to call to God out of the depths of our condition and find grace (Psalm 130: 1-4).

In our Old Testament story we read about David, in a desperate fight against his rebellious son, Absalom, instructing his soldiers not to harm him, despite his rebellion. Absalom, fleeing David's army is caught in a tree by his hair when his mule runs under the branches, left dangling at the mercy of David's soldiers and brutally killed. David, heartbroken, weeps over him: "Oh Absalom, my son, my son! If only I had died instead of you! Oh my son!!"

A father weeping over the death of his son's rebellion, desperate to spare him from the consequences of his disobedience and willing to take his place on the tree where he met his death? Does that sound familiar to you?! It is the heart-rending cry of a Heavenly Father weeping over His rebellious creation and the pain and sorrow that our rebellion brings! Yet this God is willing to take the form of a "man of sorrows", Himself, and to bear the consequences of our rebellion on the tree of crucifixion.

This is the message of the radical heart of love that God bears towards us. It's a message the Church loses sight of at our peril because it cuts down to the roots of the human condition and bears, within it, the seeds of our resurrection. As we see the Church dying around us, dare we look for our resurrection? Yes! From that cross flows the endless resurrection life that Jesus promised as the Bread of Life, bringing about the possibility of change for all of us - the change that must begin in us all and work its way outwards into the world.

And so in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul spells out the changes that must begin and work itself out in all of us as we learn to imitate this generous, serving, self-giving God who graciously calls us His "dearly loved children": exchanging truth for falsehood (Ephesians 4:25), forsaking dishonest lives for useful and creative activity, leading even beyond self-sufficiency something more: generosity (4:28); a disposition of encouragement and positive affirmation rather than criticism that only tears people down and blights their potential (4:29); and a turning away from negative emotional power of anger and bitterness, instead displacing it with compassionate kindness and grace.

This is the glorious nature of Christ that, hopefully still lives in the Church - not Ichabod! For, despite my tough question and all the challenges that face us, I do believe Christ and the glory of His presence has not left us. But let us cling on to Him all the more, because only "the presence and moving of His Spirit" can start that change!

### **Music for reflection (MP 766)**

Who can sound the depths of sorrow in the Father heart of God?  
For the children we've rejected, for the lives so deeply scarred?  
And each light that we've extinguished has brought darkness to our land  
Upon our nation, upon our nation, have mercy, Lord

Who can stand before your anger? Who can face your piercing eyes?  
For you love the weak and helpless and you hear the victims' cries

Yes, you are a God of justice and your judgement surely comes  
Upon our nation, upon our nation, have mercy, Lord

Who will stand against the violence? Who will comfort those who mourn?  
In an age of cruel rejection, who will build for love a home?  
Come and shake us into action; come and melt our hearts of stone  
Upon your people, upon your people, have mercy, Lord

### **Prayers of Intercession**

In a world where the storms of life threaten to overwhelm us, in a time where people have struggled with distance and isolation, in a place where difference and diversity are viewed with suspicion and in a space where the other is seen as a stranger. We pray for places of conflict

Loving God we pray for the church in the world, that they may give expression to your love by serving the needs of their community, without prejudice or favour recognising the need to provide encouragement, reassurance and forgiveness. At times we strain to see and hear, to discern and discover your presence declaring you are absent.

We pray for all whose lives have become especially hard, through illness, through pain. We pray for Christians who are persecuted. We think of places where injustice and oppression are part of everyday life. We remember the people who have come across in the boats over the past months... and especially the children

We lift up people who are unwell, isolated and lonely. Those who are finding lockdown difficult, people who are in financial difficulties. We remember the people who have died and those who are nearing the end of their life. We lift up in prayers those who are in our hearts and we name them now... We share together the words of the Lord's Prayer...

### **Hymn**

My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation.  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love is lord of heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing?  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love is lord of heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?

What though my joys and comforts die, I know my Saviour liveth.  
What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love is lord of heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?

The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am His! How can I keep from singing?  
No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Love is lord of heav'n and earth, how can I keep from singing?

### **Blessing**

Open our ears, Holy Spirit, to hear your voice, Open our eyes, Lord Jesus, to see your face, Open our hearts, Father God, to love like you, Lord, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Return to your Church with your blessing - **Amen.**