

Christ Church Woodley Service - 14th February 2021

This is the Sunday before lent, but also, this year, it falls on St Valentine's Day

Prayer of Introduction

God our Father, on this St Valentine's Day, as the commercial world encourages us to celebrate romantic love, help us to recognise and celebrate your perfect love. A love we don't deserve; cannot earn or escape. A love that sought us out as sinners, knowing what that love could make us into. A love that caused your son to sacrifice himself for our forgiveness and redemption, so that through his love we might be acceptable to you. Help us to accept that love. Forgive us for our sin and strengthen us that we might be forgiven, and learn to share your love with all we meet. *Amen*

Hymn: StF 503 Love Divine <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sw5ZCZeS32M>

1 Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art ;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

3 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 !

2 Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive ;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

We suggest you insert appropriate prayers yourself at this point.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come, your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
Now and forever more. Amen

Hymn chosen by the young people: We are the parts of the body

For words see last page

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaB-WkaOHDY>

Readings for the Sunday before Lent

2 Kings 2 1-18

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. The company of the prophets at

Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?" "Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on. Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Elisha then picked up Elijah's cloak that had fallen from him and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. He took the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and struck the water with it. "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked. When he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and he crossed over. The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." And they went to meet him and bowed to the ground before him.

"Look," they said, "we your servants have fifty able men. Let them go and look for your master. Perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has picked him up and set him down on some mountain or in some valley."

"No," Elisha replied, "do not send them."

But they persisted until he was too embarrassed to refuse. So he said, "Send them." And they sent fifty men, who searched for three days but did not find him. When they returned to Elisha, who was staying in Jericho, he said to them, "Didn't I tell you not to go?"

Mark 9 2-10

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. They kept the matter to themselves, discussing what "rising from the dead" meant.

Address

The Sunday before lent. I wonder, do you give something up for lent? What are you going to give up this year? There seems so little left to give up at the moment. So little pleasure we can enjoy. No weekends away, visits to family and friends, no meals out, not even going to look round the shops. We have all already given up swimming or going to dance classes or art classes. No social groups, and no coffee and a chat after church. And now, dare we even try to think about when it all might end, for fear of yet another disappointment when targets are not met, or suggested measures do not work. For some, I am sure, have times when you don't know what to do next, how to fill the empty time we have now we are not doing the things we once could.

On the mountain with Christ at the transfiguration, Peter did not want to give up being in the presence of the two Old Testament greats, Moses and Elijah, and so suggests they build shelters for each of them. Peter, James and John were awestruck by what they saw, unsure of what to do. Jesus, Moses and Elijah are the three celebrated key figures for whom the stories indicate no graves. Jesus and Elijah sharing the distinction of ascending into heaven; When Jesus tells them not to speak of it Peter James and John quite possibly thought that even if they did the other disciples would not believe them, far better to think on what could possibly have been meant by "The son of Man rising from the dead"

In the passage from 2 Kings, Elisha didn't want to think about having to give up being with Elijah. He knew God was going to take Elijah from him that day, presumably because God had told him, along with all the other prophets in Israel who turned up to meet them at each point they stopped off at. Elijah knew and, it seems, wanted to spare Elisha from seeing him go. But although he did not want to think about it, in his sadness neither did Elisha want to leave Elijah for one moment. Possibly because he hoped that whilst he was there it might not happen, possibly because he wanted ensure he spent as much time with him as he possibly could, knowing that in this life he would never see him again. Elijah led him all over the place, and each time Elijah said "stay here, for the Lord has sent me to"... testing Elisha's resolve. There was nothing that was going to stop Elisha from following his master.

It possibly seems as though the route was a random one, but each of the places is a significant one in the life of Israel. They started from Gilgal which was where, after crossing the Jordan into the promised land, Joshua had the Israelites camp and where he established a monument made from 12 stones they had taken from the Jordan when they crossed it.

And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan. He said to the Israelites, 'In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them, 'Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.' For the LORD your God dried up the Jordan before you until you had crossed over. The LORD your God did to the Jordan just what he had done to the Red Sea when he dried it up before us until we had crossed over. He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the LORD is powerful and so that you might always fear the LORD your God (Joshua Ch 4)

It was also where Joshua insisted the men were circumcised, setting them apart for God as a nation

Gilgal means separation - a symbol of separation of the people from their past, and a symbol of the separation of the people for God.

They then went on to Bethel, where Jacob had rested and had the dream of his stairway to Heaven - and so named the place Bethel, or God's dwelling. It was for some time the resting place for the Ark of the Covenant, the place of God's presence.

From Bethel they went to Jericho. Again a place famed for the triumph God gave to Joshua. It seems a strange command to take a city - march around it for 7 days, but in faith Joshua led the army round the walls each day, a symbol of a walk of faith, trusting in God for victory.

From there Elijah took Elisha to the Jordan, a river of no small significance to Israel. God enabled them to cross on dry ground through the river to get from the wilderness into Canaan. In the Jordan later Naaman was to wash to be cleansed of leprosy, John was to baptise Jesus. A river symbolic of moving from Death to Life, of resurrection

And so Elisha was led as much on a spiritual journey as on a physical one. – being separated from the past and set aside for God, to be in God's presence, to walk in faith even through death to resurrection.

Is that the road we follow?

Paul sums up his Christian Journey in Philippians 3v 4-10 in much the same four steps.

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ —yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Are we able to walk that walk? We have been separated from each other by the restrictions in place because of Covid, but are we willing to continue that separation to follow God? To separate ourselves from our former lives to seek God's presence, walk in faith with Him and accept the life of the resurrection Christ has made possible.

As for Elisha, he passes the test that God and Elijah have set him - so Elijah turns to him to say

"Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

Elijah is asking for the first son's inheritance, to be Elijah's heir. Elijah does not grant that promise – it is not his to grant but Gods, but instead answers

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours —otherwise, it will not."

Then Elijah is taken up into heaven. If Elisha was sad before, now he is grief stricken. Not in despair but despondent. How can his world have changed so dramatically with the loss of his master?

At the other end of Lent we will be thinking of how the disciples felt a similar loss at the death of Christ, despair, despondency. Perhaps in our lockdown situation we can empathise with that view. Cut off from our friends, family, normal daily lives. But the overarching message from both the crucifixion and from the transportation of Elijah is one that ends in hope and a promise. Elisha received the inheritance from Elijah; the crucifixion ends in the Resurrection, Christ's ascension and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Elisha rips his clothes with grief and picks up Elijah's cloak which has fallen to the ground and without thinking, taps it on the river Jordan, which parts for him to cross back. In his grief and sadness he acts just as he had seen Elijah do. It becomes clear to the prophets standing there watching him that he has indeed inherited the spirit of God from Elijah. He doesn't stop to question "will it work" or "Am I good enough for God to work through me" but just does as he has been taught in his time with Elijah, and naturally accepts the power of God will do these things. This is much the same as Peter and John at the gate "Beautiful" when they heal the cripple. There is no suggestion they stop and think about it, discuss between them whether it will work and then in doubt approach the man. No, they have seen Jesus do this, he has helped them to experience his power, and so with confidence they know Jesus will work through them to heal.

Who were those who we revered in the faith, who taught us to believe, to feel God's presence, and how to act to share his love? We may not be called to perform miracles, but we are all called to share his love. Like Elisha, we too are, through Christ, heirs to God's spirit.

In this coming time of Lent, in lockdown, it may be more difficult to share that love, but perhaps one thing we could give up is some time - time to contact others, time to show we care by phone, or that dreaded Zoom, or perhaps by writing a note and dropping it through someone's door whilst out for our daily permitted exercise - not just to our friends and family, but the lonely, the vulnerable, to someone we wouldn't normally speak to or contact, to help build them up in their time of need.

Our lockdown experience, whilst pausing our normal lives, gives us a great opportunity. Separated from so many things we can focus on God to be in his presence. When we walk, walk in the faith that there is something good we can do each day to share Gods love with those that need it.

Prayers of intercession: Read Hymn StF 527 Pray for a world

- 1 Pray for a world where every child finds welcome in a sheltered place, where love is tender, undefiled, and firmness intertwines with grace.
- 2 Pray for a world where passion's fire burns not in force or careless lust, where God's good gift of deep desire is safe in arms of faith and trust.
- 3 Pray for a nation just and fair that seeks the welfare of us all, where leaders guide with prudent care and nurture life for great and small.
- 4 Pray for a world where all have voice and none will batter, rape, abuse. Till then, may all have rightful choice and pray for wisdom as they choose.

Ruth Duck (b.1947)

Lord we pray for the world amidst its crisis of pandemic

We pray for the world's leaders, those in Authority, that they may use their power and influence, not to gratify their own selfish desires, but for the good of the people they govern. Grant them wisdom and a desire for peace and prosperity for all people.

We pray for those affected by the Coup in Myanmar, for the refugees from the wars in Syria, Africa and the Yemen

We remember too those who are suffering, especially as a result of the pandemic, for the stresses and strains.

For those who are alone during lockdown

For those who are forced to be together and can find little time to themselves

For those who long to visit friends and loved ones

For those who are concerned because their jobs are threatened

For those who suddenly have more work than they can handle

For those who are ill with the disease, and those who have lost family and find it hard to mourn

And we give thanks for those who minister tirelessly to the sick, possibly risking their own health.

We pray for the church, in this strange situation where we cannot meet together, and for those who lead your flock, looking to spread your word. Fill us with your spirit that we may know your presence with us, even if we cannot experience each others, and help us find new ways to fulfil your mission here on earth that others may see you in us and rejoice.

Amen

Hymn StF 564: O Thou who camest from above <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VPvZ3hj4p0>

1

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart!

2

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return,
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

3

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me —

4

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley

Closing Prayers

We suggest you say the words of the Grace or other appropriate prayer.

**We are the parts of a body,
Every person belonging.
All of us just as important as the other one.
(Repeat)**

**How can the eye say to the hand,
'You're not needed! You're not needed!'**?
**How can the head say to the feet,
'You're not needed! You're not needed!'**?
**I need you, you need me,
Let's be who we're made to be,
Everybody different with a special part to play.**

How would we look if we all were a foot?
Just imagine, just imagine!
Where would we be if we all were a knee?
Just imagine, just imagine!
**I need you, you need me,
Let's be who we're made to be,
Everybody different with a special part to play.**

**Why should the ear say to the mouth,
'I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!'**?
**Why should the nose say to the lips,
'I'm not worthy! I'm not worthy!'**?
**I need you, you need me,
Let's be who we're made to be,
Everybody different with a special part to play.**