

Easter 6 – 9th May 2021 at Christ Church Woodley

Opening words: Welcome to this time of worship, whoever you are, and wherever you may be. We are devoting this time to the worship of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. We begin with words from John's Gospel - chapter 13 verses 34-35 – says:

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

Later we shall consider these words together, but first let us sing a hymn about God's love.

Hymn StF 103 God is love: let heaven adore him

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU2uZVzxGDw>

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| <p>1 God is Love : let heaven adore him ;
God is Love : let earth rejoice ;
let creation sing before him,
and exalt him with one voice.
He who laid the earth's foundation,
he who spread the heavens above,
he who breathes through all creation,
he is Love, eternal Love.</p> <p>2 God is Love : and he, enfolding
all the world in one embrace,
with unfailing grasp is holding
every child of every race.
And when human hearts are breaking
under sorrow's iron rod,
then they find that selfsame aching
deep within the heart of God.</p> | <p>3 God is Love : and though with blindness
sin afflicts each human soul,
God's eternal loving-kindness
holds and guides and keeps them whole.
Sin and death and hell shall never
o'er us final triumph gain ;
God is Love, so Love for ever
o'er the universe must reign.</p> |
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Timothy Rees (1874–1939) *(alt.)*

Prayer

God of love, we come before you now to offer you our praise and our worship.

We have just sung of your love for the whole world and yet you know and love each one of us.

You watch over us in times of uncertainty; you lead us into new experiences of your love and care; you challenge us to face new situations with you; and when the experiences of life bring us sorrow or pain, you are there to give us comfort and peace.

You know each one of us better than we know ourselves, yet you go on loving us. Most of all, in sending Jesus, your Son, into the world you have shown us how great your love for us is. In Jesus you took human form, with all its limitations, so that you could show us your truth. In Jesus you showed us how to live. In Jesus your selfless love overcame even death. In Jesus you reached out to give us your life and so we worship you.

We praise for the gift of your Holy Spirit in our lives, showing us where we have gone wrong, working in us to cleanse and to heal, giving us strength to live your way, and guiding us in our journey of life with you.

O God, You are our God and we are your people. We offer the words and music of this time together in praise to you. When we leave this place help us to go on worshipping you by the way we live our lives.

We pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.

Give us today 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. Amen

All-age talk

I wonder if any of you are collectors. Children are sometimes encouraged to collect cards of a particular type and stick them in a book. That can be an expensive time trying to get the whole set of cards. For a while, in my teens, I collected stamps and I know we have at least one serious stamp collector in our church family. However, I gave my collection to a nephew long ago. In my adult life, particularly when we have enjoyed holidays, I have tried to bring home something to remind me of our holiday and it has often been a piece of pottery. It may have started when the kind ladies in a Welsh guest house, who looked after Richard and me on our honeymoon, gave us a jug from their table crockery. It was no ordinary jug but a Mason's Regency jug. We know that because of the mark on the base of the jug. Over the years I have made a collection of vases, jugs and plates from our holidays, or presents I've been given from family or friends' holidays. Most things I keep because I like how they look, or because of the story of how I came to have them. For example, this plate is one I bought on a visit to the Waterperry Gardens near Oxford. It's signed by the artist and I have a piece of paper telling me something about her. I just liked everything about it and I have it next to this jug which was a present from Wales. It also has the artist's signature on it. Both items were inspired by plants – living things in the natural world.



I expect some of you enjoy watching the Antiques Road Show. People bring along their collection of things that interest them or have a story to tell, often from their own family. They bring them to experts who can tell them more about their precious items, and tell them what they think they are worth. Some things have great value; others are important because they have a story which means the item would be good in a museum. Many of the items have some mark on them that tells the expert that they are genuine. That's what is most important to the owner – is it the real thing; is it genuine?

If there are Junior Church children with us this morning, I'd like you, after our next song, to draw something that is mentioned in the song – or something that you have collected, and later in the service I'll ask you to show us your pictures.

Now we're going to sing one of my favourite songs:

Hymn: Who put the colour in the rainbow?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPQzzdvwKs8>

Who put the colours in the rainbow?
Who put the salt into the sea?
Who put the cold in the snowflake?
Who made you and me?
Who put the hump upon the camel?
Who put the neck on the giraffe?
Who put the tail upon the monkey?
Who made hyenas laugh?
Who made whales and snails and quails?
Who made hogs and dogs and frogs?
Who made bats and rats and cats?
Who made everything?

Who put the gold into the sunshine?
Who put the sparkle in the stars?
Who put the silver in the moonlight?
Who made Earth and Mars?
Who put the scent into the roses?
Who taught the honey bee to dance?
Who put the tree inside the acorn?
It surely can't be chance!
Who made seas and leaves and trees?
Who made snow and winds that blow?
Who made streams and rivers flow?
God made all of these!

Reading: John 15: 9-17

⁹“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. ¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

Reading: Acts 11:1-18

¹ The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. ² So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him ³ and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

⁴ Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: ⁵ “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. ⁶ I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. ⁷ Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

⁸ “I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

⁹ “The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’ ¹⁰ This happened three times, and then it was pulled up to heaven again.

¹¹ “Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. ¹² The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. ¹³ He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called

Peter. ¹⁴ He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.'

¹⁵ "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. ¹⁶ Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' ¹⁷ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?"

¹⁸ When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life."

Hymn StF 394 Spirit of God, unseen as the wind

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qywGaKEM2IA>

*Spirit of God, unseen as the wind,
gentle as is the dove,
teach us the truth and help us believe,
show us the Saviour's love.*

2 Without your help we fail our Lord,
we cannot live his way ;
we need your power, we need your strength,
following Christ each day.

1 You spoke to us long, long ago,
gave us the written word ;
we read it still, needing its truth,
through it God's voice is heard.

Margaret V. Old

Sermon: Recognising Disciples

We had a look at some ceramics earlier. I like to watch the Antiques Road Show when I can. It's always full of interesting and beautiful things. The experts are amazing. They can tell us so much from a small mark on an item, but they often have a very good idea about the genuine nature of an item before they've properly examined it. They have learned to recognise the real thing.

This morning, we are concerned with what distinguishes **true disciples** or followers of Jesus. How are they to be recognised? I began our service with words from John's gospel which says "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

In our reading from chapter 15 of the gospel, Jesus talks further with his disciples about this love – the Father's love for him, and the need for the disciples to love each other. So, let's think for a while about why Jesus spoke these words to the disciples at this time, and what he expected of them.

Although we are in the Easter period in the church's year, our reading from John takes us back to the words of Jesus spoken before he was arrested and put on trial. He told the disciples that his obedience to his Father's commands mean that he remains safe in his Father's love. Jesus assured his disciples that their obedience to him would keep them in his love. He then said that they were to be called his friends. He told them that there was no greater love than that which causes a person to lay down his life for his friends – a clear reference to his crucifixion. The disciples had no real understanding at this time that Jesus would die, but later it would make sense to them. For now, Jesus is trying to reassure them, and strengthen their bonding to him, and to each other. The love that they would have for each other would enable others to recognise that they had been with Christ. It was to be the signature, the mark of their genuine discipleship, and for all others who would follow Christ.

A few years later, when writing to the Ephesians (chapter 5 verse 2), Paul said "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Loving others, as God loves us, is the one ingredient of Christian discipleship that really matters. Christian living without love is like making a meal and missing out a vital ingredient. Once our daughter made up one of our favourite dishes – a potato, cheese and leek pie. Unfortunately, she left out the goat's cheese which was what gave the dish its distinctive flavour. It just wasn't the same without it.

Paul recognised love as the most important gift a Christian could possess. In 1 Corinthians 13 verses 1-13, the passage which is often chosen as a wedding reading, he lists the qualities which will be exhibited by a person who loves. I'll remind you of the qualities that as Christians, we should be showing each other.

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

The Revd Philip Brooks has said, “Duty makes us do things well, but love makes us do them beautifully.” Mother Teresa of Calcutta is someone whom the world recognised as one who lived a life of sacrificial love for others. She said this about love, “I have found the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is no hurt, but only more love.” She loved people sacrificially, just as Jesus did.

Real love is open-eyed. It can see people as they are with all their irritabilities and weaknesses, but it understands and still loves. Jesus loved his disciples in spite of their failures, in spite of their desertion of him. He came back to them after the resurrection and assured them of his continuing presence with them and his love for them. In particular he came back to Peter, who had denied him, and gave him the opportunity to declare his love for Jesus. Jesus loved forgivingly. The love that Christians should have for each other must be love that understands, and love that forgives. That's the kind of love that the world can recognise as the mark of a genuine disciple of Jesus.

Our reading from Acts clearly comes after the events of the first Pentecost in Jerusalem. It also comes after a Pentecost as experienced by a man called Cornelius, and other gentile believers, when Peter had preached to them. Peter was criticised by the Jewish Christians who asked him to explain why he had eaten with gentiles. He therefore told them the story of his vision and what had happened when he took the gospel message to the household of Cornelius. This was a momentous time for Peter and for the early church. Christianity up to this point was a reformed movement within Judaism, with the believers expecting to keep the essential elements of the Jewish faith, namely circumcision and the food laws. The leaders in Jerusalem listened to Peter's story and conceded that God had “granted even the Gentiles repentance unto eternal life.” Of course, Gentile converts to Judaism had always been hospitably received in the synagogues, particularly those of the Dispersion, far away from Judea. At this point in the history of the church, most of the apostles regarded these Gentile converts in similar light. They were not quite ready to throw open the church to the Gentile world. That was to be the essence of Paul's ministry. But here, Peter was beginning to understand that true Disciples of Christ need not conform to the rules of Judaism.

A true disciple is not someone who lives by particular rules or traditions – however commendable they may be. Peter and the other apostles were forced to recognise that it was not necessary for believers to be circumcised, that is to become Jews in order to become followers of Christ. It was not necessary to observe every point of the Law. What mattered was to have received the Holy Spirit through believing in Jesus. The new life, the life of God within a believer, was what made someone recognisable as a true disciple.

Paul wrestled with the relationship between observing the Law and believing in Jesus in his letter to the Romans. He concluded that the Law could make him aware of his sin, but was powerless to deal with his sin. He had to 'die to sin' through faith in Jesus Christ, and so become alive in Christ. This change in him was the work of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God. And he told the Roman Christians that "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children."

And so through the struggles of Peter, who still got things wrong at times, and the visionary activity of Paul, the Christian church burst out of the old wineskins of Judaism. It must have been enormously difficult for the Jerusalem church to come to terms with the idea that the Messiah had come, not just to the Jewish people, but to people of all nations. They were not unfamiliar with the practice of absorbing a few Gentiles into the Jewish faith. The idea that the Christian faith was no longer to be a development of Judaism, but a new global organisation in which the Jewish way of life would be set aside, took immense courage and insight, but it did not all happen overnight. Nevertheless, the Gentile converts were recognised as true disciples. They were God's children, because of their faith, and they received the same Spirit of adoption as God's children as did the Jewish believers.

So the first disciples of Jesus, and the early Christian church were learning that the mark of a true follower of Jesus was to be accepted into God's family through spiritual rebirth, and to live a life in which love was the all-important ingredient. A true disciple is able to love because he is born of God's Spirit.

Throughout history parts of the church have struggled to show that love, while others have done so. In the days of Paul's ministry, the Christians soon faced the situation where those in one part of the world needed practical help from those in other areas. There was famine in Judea and collections were made in other parts of the church to help the Christians there. In 2 Corinthians chapter 9, Paul encouraged them to make a collection and be generous for the sake of others.

When we talk of community today we need to think beyond our own neighbourhood and into the far corners of the earth. Our TV screens bring the needs of people across the globe right into our homes. Christian Aid, along with other charities, is working with people throughout the world, meeting their need for immediate assistance and working to give them a fairer share of the world's resources. Christian Aid Week begins tomorrow. The contribution we make to the work of Christian Aid through giving and praying, is all part of the Holy Spirit's work of love in our world today. This is also true of all that various members of our church family are doing for our church project, Toilet Twinning, and for all the local charities our church is supporting.

Jesus exhorted his disciples to love each other. The universal church as well as each individual church, is in great need of the Holy Spirit to give the kind of unity which should characterise the body of Christ. I don't mean that there must be structural unity, although that may be possible one day. I do mean that Christians should have respect for each other's traditions and a loving regard for all who seek to follow Christ.

"And now I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another, then everyone will know that you are my disciples." May the Holy Spirit so live in each one of us that we may be able to love each other. Only so will we become the community God intends us to be and so communicate the good news to those we meet.

Hymn StF 673 Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q_KR9f-7a7o

- 1 Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown,
will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown
in you and you in me?
- 2 Will you leave yourself behind
if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind
and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare
should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer
in you and you in me?
- 3 Will you let the blinded see
if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free
and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean,
and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean
in you and you in me?
- 4 Will you love the 'you' you hide
if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside
and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found
to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound
in you and you in me?
- 5 Lord, your summons echoes true
when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you
and never be the same.
In your company I'll go
where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow
in you and you in me.

John L. Bell (b. 1949) and Graham Maule (b. 1958)

Prayers of Intercession (with response)

Lord, we pray for your world. When you made it, it was good, beautiful and perfect. We are sorry for the ways in which we spoil your world by the things we do and the choices we make. We thank you for those who remind us that cannot go on using and misusing the earth's resources. Help us to be willing to change the way we live so that the earth will be sustained for future generations.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

Lord, we pray for those for whom daily living is a struggle. Those, in the poorest countries, who must work long hours for little reward, and barely have enough to feed their families. Those, in our own country, who have no work because of Covid19, and don't know how they'll pay the bills and feed their families. Open our eyes to help in any way we can.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

We pray for young people everywhere; for those who are at school, college or university, or on apprenticeship training. We pray for all those facing the restrictions which Covid 19 has brought to places of education and training; that they will be able to cope with the new challenges and settle into different ways of learning.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who are lonely and alone, for those who feel they've been forgotten, for those who feel sad and uncertain.

For those who are ill, and those who care for them.
For doctors and nurses, porters and cleaners working in our hospitals.

For those who grieve the loss of a loved one, particularly the family and friends of Doreen Riley. We thank you for all that she meant to those who knew her.

We pray for those we know to be in any kind of need:

(Those on Zoom are invited to unmute and mention those they know that need our prayers or insert your own prayers)

May we all take our share in showing the love of God to those he sends us each day.

Lord in your mercy. **Hear our prayer**

In the name of Jesus whose healing touch reached out to those in need.

Amen

Hymn StF 660 Called by Christ to be disciples

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_5f10N6umzc

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| <p>1 Called by Christ to be disciples
every day in every place,
we are not to hide as hermits
but to spread the way of grace ;
citizens of heaven's kingdom,
though this world is where we live,
as we serve a faithful Master,
faithful service may we give.</p> <p>2 Richly varied are our pathways,
many callings we pursue :
may we use our gifts and talents
always, Lord, to honour you ;
so in government or commerce,
college, hospice, farm or home,
whether volunteers or earning,
may we see your kingdom come.</p> | <p>3 Hard decisions may confront us,
urging us to compromise ;
still obedience is our watchword —
make us strong and make us wise !
Secular is turned to sacred,
made a precious offering,
as our daily lives are fashioned
in submission to our King.</p> |
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Martin Leckebusch (b. 1962)

Blessing

God the Father and Jesus Christ, the Father's Son,
give you grace, mercy and peace;
May they be yours in truth and love.
Amen.