

Sunday 17th Maty

Opening sentence

Lord, hear my voice when I call to you.
My heart has prompted me to seek your face;
I seek it Lord; do not hide from me, alleluia.

Welcome

Welcome to Sunday worship, coming from the Benefice of Rural East York on the 17th May – the 6th Sunday of Easter. Wherever you are joining us from, and whatever time, you are most welcome. In your pyjamas or in your Sunday Best, with family or by yourself, in the mood for church or reluctant but dutiful, I pray that you know the presence of God deep in your soul today.

With the changes in the rules, I thought I'd risk stepping in to one of our churches for the first time in a while. And as St. Nick's is a stone's throw from the Rectory, is seemed a good place to begin. So let us begin, and let us pray:

Litany

Have mercy on us O God, God almighty, God of hosts, noble God, Lord of the world, unutterable God, Creator of the elements, invisible God. Sacred presence, you who abide in heaven, have mercy on us as we become aware of your divine life bound up with our human life, alive in the world and dancing in our spirit. Amen.

Invocation

Lord, be with us this day,
Within us to purify us;
Above us to draw us up;
Beneath us to sustain us;
Before us to lead us;
Behind us to restrain us;
Around us to protect us.

St Patrick

Collect

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Bible reading - Acts 17. 22-31

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the

objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we too are his offspring."

Since we are God's offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.'

Reflection - Finding God in unexpected places.

Our bible story this morning has St. Paul in Athens, as part of his missionary journey. It seems that both he and the Athenians liked a good argument!

Paul has been wandering around Athens for a while, and, whilst there, the writer of Acts says that 'he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols'. However, Paul changes tack in his missionary work. He doesn't berate them for their idolatry, but searches out some common ground; he looks for open doors and builds some bridges (and uses not a little flattery, I think!).

Paul extols the city of Athens and its religious fervour. Paul is impressed by the widespread religious interests of his audience. He has, of course, left his comfortable home-ground of Judaism (with its notable absence of idols), and is engaging the the Greeks where they are, and in language and imagery they are familiar with. He doesn't tell them that they are wrong; but finds an opening in their mutual agreement, and, in a sense, exploits their curiosity. He engages their sympathy by focussing on the creational work of God. Even as he begins to speak of what Israel has known of God, Paul emphasizes that this God has already gifted the listening Athenians with something near and dear to them: life and breath.

Paul cleverly chooses as his proof text not a passage of Scripture, but a word from a Greek poet who describes God as the one in whom "we live and move and have our being". This is some fundamental common ground of humanity, as where else do we live and move and have our being within another except in our mother's womb? And this image leads to a declaration that humans, both Paul and the Athenians, are like offspring of the one in whom they had been carried.

Paul was perhaps wise in setting aside his own assumptions about what he found offensive in the Athenians' beliefs and practices, and we can admire each of the ways that Paul attempts to meet the Athenians within their own spiritual landscape.

Was he simply being opportunistic? Or two-faced? Was there a level of dishonesty going on here so that he could flatter and engage the Athenians just enough that he could hit them with the truth of the gospel? Or did Paul already have a sense that his God was not reliant on his servants bringing him into contexts where he previously did not exist? Was Paul learning to be surprised?

God is God, and we are God's servants. The 'mission of God', or *Misero Dei*, can be understood like this: God is active and engaged and present in the world, and, if we are attentive and curious, we can search and find that he was at work, well before we discovered it. Because of this, we can find God in the most unexpected places, in the most unlikely of people, in the alien and the strange. With God, we are always playing catchup!

As a young man I remember being profoundly affected reading the book *City of Joy* by Dominique Lapierre. It describes the life of a young Polish priest who chooses to live and minister in the slums of Delhi. In the midst of appalling poverty, he encounters moments of miracles and the presence of God in the most unlikely places. Not in a church, not in the neat and tidy, not in the clean or the beautiful, not in the educated or socially acceptable, but in the people all around him. He went there to take God into a challenging situation, but quickly found that God was already there at work.

God is Lord of all, and in all, and works through all. It is not the absence of God that we experience, in all truth, but rather the lack of eyes that can see him. This God, who is the creator of all and who is present in all of God's creation, invites us to open our eyes to his presence, and to discover him in the most unexpected places and situations, for God, as St. Paul reminds us, '*is not far from each one of us*'.

Meditation

Take a few moments to reflect and meditate:

- I wonder where are you finding God right now in this current situation?
- I wonder where in nature you might encounter the divine presence?
- I wonder when in the past you have met God in an unexpected place or person?
- I wonder how you might find new ways to open your eyes to the presence of God in your daily life?

Intercessions

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank you for showing us how we can still come together to worship you, even though your churches are closed. We come now, as the body of Christ and in the name of Christ, to bring our prayers to you.

Lord, send your Holy Spirit to give comfort to the thousands of people who have lost loved ones to COVID 19. Give peace and strength to those who are sick and afraid and those who care for them.

Give courage and help to those who struggle with their loss - of jobs, of health, of income, of family and friends, of freedom.

Lord Jesus, strengthen those working on the front line. Bless them and protect them. You teach us that anyone who cares for the least of your sisters and brothers, does it for you. Let them feel your presence as they work, particularly through difficult days and nights.

Father, we pray for the gift of faith for those who have nowhere to turn. Raise up women and men of your church to bring them good news and encouragement to turn to you and pray.

Help those in authority to make the right decisions for their people, especially ensuring that carers are protected and to listen to those who have wisdom and experience. Raise up those who put their trust in you and care for the welfare of the people before their own.

Dear Father, Hidden amongst the fear, sickness and despair of this dangerous virus, we find you and we still have much to be thankful for. For the NHS, from the consultants, doctors and nurses to the porters and cleaners and for other workers on the frontline - those who sacrifice so much for the sake of others, day and night, working so faithfully.

For our lovely villages where we can enjoy the beauty of spring when we're out of our homes.

For the amazing spirit of generosity, kindness and friendship which people have shown from all countries in the world, to willingly help those at risk, alone and isolating.

For the technology which enables some families and friends to communicate when they can't meet and hold each other, for many children and students to study and to enjoy arts and crafts, for us and others who can still take part in church services and to be able to order food and have it delivered.

Dear Father, In your mercy, hear our prayers. Have mercy on us . Stay with us. Heal and help us.

In the name of Christ. Amen

The Lord's Prayer

Closing words

O Lord our Father, almighty everlasting God, we ask you to send your holy Angel from heaven to guard, cherish, protect, visit, and defend all who have gathered in this space; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Guiding God,
be with us in our going out and coming home,
in our journeying and returning,
in our decision making and organising.

Guarding God,
be with us through the calm and through the storm,
be our comfort when we're hurting,
be our helper when we're falling.

Gracious God,
walk with us every moment of this new week.

May you be found today, in unexpected places
by unsuspecting people going about their daily lives.
May you be found today, in predictable places
by inquisitive people searching for a different life.
May you be found today, Lord!
Amen.