

Service sheet for North Kent Methodist Circuit service, 17 May 2020
Rev Dr Bonni-Belle Pickard

Call to worship

Lord God of every time and place,
We gather together to worship you today.
We gather in our homes, physically distanced from others
But close to each other in our love and care,
And as close to you as the breath within us.
Come, Lord Jesus, and help us again to know you.
Amen.

We sing together:

1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here;
Come bow before him now with reverence and fear:
In him no sin is found – we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.
2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned:
How awesome is the sight – our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.
3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;
He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace:
No work too hard for him – in faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.

■ David J Evans, StF 20

We pray together: (Prayer by Alison Muir)

Gracious God, we come before You now,
drawn by the power of Your welcoming love.
We come to You in these troubled times
when the world seems turned upside down by the Corona Virus,
affecting so many people in so many ways.
We come with our sorrows as well as our joys, our fears and concerns as well as our faith.
We come just as we are, knowing that You welcome us, and that through Your mercy,
we may know Your love and peace.

Everlasting God, we thank You that in this fragile world,
You are the one firm foundation, always loving, true and good.
You are the creator and sustainer of all life.
You are the almighty one who reigns supreme beyond time and space,
yet you know and love each one of us and all that You have created.
Thank You for opening up the way for us to worship You through Jesus Christ Your Son and
through Your Spirit within us.
We worship You our saviour and friend.

We thank You that in these uncertain times we can hold onto the truth of Your Word:
“that all things work together for good for those who love You,

who are called according to Your purpose”;
that although things may be difficult for us in so many ways,
we can know that You are with us;
that these difficulties can be opportunities for us to grow more like You,
and opportunities for us to reach out to others with Your love in their time of need,
whether their needs are physical, emotional or spiritual.
We thank You that You are opening us up to different ways of being and doing things –
even as we gather for this service today.

We thank You that, even though we are physically isolated from one another,
we are never alone as You are always with us, wanting a relationship with us.
And yet, in the distraction of these times,
we confess that we may not have turned to You as You have wanted us to.
We may have been fearful instead of putting our trust in You;
we may have been drawn to the news and media rather than waiting on You in prayer
to hear what You would say to us and to the world in these times.
We may not have recognised Your Spirit prompting us to help others.
We are sorry for where we have not been in right relationship with You.
Father, we thank You that, in Your mercy,
You are ready to forgive us when we confess our sins to You.
As we confess our sins now, we receive Your forgiveness
and ask that You would lead us to make the best use of our time in the coming days.
Amen.

Acts 17: 22-28

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.”

Meditation: the God who becomes known to us (Bonni-Belle Pickard)

If Paul were walking the streets of our lockdown communities today,
What would he notice? Would he be able to determine what our 'religion' is?

If he were walking along the High Street, he might be puzzled to see so much shut down --
Surely Paul would notice the vast temples we've built to consumerism and entertainment:
the malls and large shops are all closed --
Along with the nail bars and hair salons and restaurants and theatres and the football pitches -
Everything except the shops selling food and medicine.
Would he assume our religion is about worshipping our bodies?

Paul might see a few people on the streets-- some wearing masks and most 'social distancing'
So he might assume that our 'religion' is about keeping oneself 'safe' --
If he were walking in our neighbourhoods,
he might notice that there's quite a bit of DIY and gardening going on --
Have we become 'religious' about keeping our personal space tidy?

Perhaps Paul would notice all the rainbow pictures taped onto front windows --
Perhaps he'd wonder what all the noise was about on Thursday evenings...
And someone might tell him about how we're looking out for each other
And grateful for those who are doing what they can
And we're actually learning a bit more about our neighbours...

Would Paul see that our church buildings are shut down?
Would he be aware that, during normal times,
Many would not have even noticed there were church buildings around?

If Paul had been walking around a few months ago,
He might have realised that in our society's rush to get ahead --
To build successful businesses and homes and families and social lives
To be in control of our own lives and wealth and events and futures --
In the rush, we had little time to think about things like God and religion...
For many, that all seemed so antiquated and irrelevant --
Like the woman who told me religion for was folks who couldn't make it on their own.

The folk of ancient Athens had a different perspective:
they understood that the Divine was everywhere,
and there were multiple gods to appease;
their statues to numerous gods meant they were afraid of leaving something out,
so they had a statue to 'the Unknown God'...
Which is what Paul used to introduce the God who could be known in Christ Jesus.

In some ways, our society *is* like that of ancient Athens:
increasingly aware of a variety of religions over recent years,
But seeing them as optional add-on's to already-busy lives.
I remember a wedding ceremony I conducted on a beach in Thailand a few years ago --
Though it was to be a secular wedding ceremony,
I had included a few prayers and scripture readings...
Afterwards I had several young men approach me (when they thought no one was looking)

To thank me for that service and wistfully confess: 'We have lost the sacred in our lives'.
Perhaps they were yearning *for the God we haven't known*.

If Paul were with us today, perhaps he'd recognise that though we're often hesitant
To talk about our 'faith' in public,
When times are tough, and we're forced to stay home and reflect
Not just for a few moments -- or a few hours -- but for weeks and months,
Then we begin again to recognise the God from whom we've become estranged
In our personal lives, in our public lives.
Perhaps we haven't 'known' God because we haven't been willing to spend time with God.

Over the past several weeks, I've found myself having many pastoral conversations
On the phone, through emails and facebook chats and zoom meetings,
With my family spread across the world,
And with church folk spread across my churches and the circuit.
I'm learning to ask more and more: 'Where is God in all this?'
Many of you have been brave enough to give me answers, some tentative, some sure:
God is with us in this crisis, in how we are learning again to help each other,
And to *recognise* God's goodness all around us...

Perhaps we are slowly but surely becoming reacquainted
With a God who doesn't push but waits patiently to be recognised...
A God who is oh-so-eager! to make godself known to each of us.
But perhaps waiting for such a time as this to gain the attention of a society
that has been focussed on its own agenda for a very long time...
A God waiting on a people who have become so intent on controlling our own events
Our futures, our social and political situations,
on concealing mistakes of our past,
that we've lost sight of the God-who-is and has great plans for each of us.

I was reading recently about Martin Luther King, Jr, the civil rights leader
whom we also recognise as one of the great preachers of our time.
MLK was the son and grandson of a long line of preachers
But he was also living as part of a society that was wondering
If all that God-stuff was a relic of the past –
That even if there was a God –
would that God would be interested in or relevant to our everyday lives?
As a young man, MLK had set aside getting to know God in a personal way
And was instead pursuing a PhD in 'religious personalism': an intellectual study of religion
Knowing 'about' God rather than knowing God....

In the midst of that study, MLK found himself pastoring a small southern US church
at a particular time in history
when that which was good and right and true was being scorned, abandoned...
He had within himself a deep sense of knowing he had to lead a cause: a crusade against evil!
And he had thrown himself into leading that cause.
But then he began to receive death threats – against himself and his young family.
And he realised that to continue to lead the cause would put them all in great danger.
There seemed to be no safe and sensible way to continue.
Not able to sleep one night, MLK sat at his kitchen table with a cup of coffee at midnight

And poured out his anguish – alone – to whom? To what?

In his words:

“I was ready to give up. With my cup of coffee sitting untouched before me,
I tried to think of a way to move out of the picture without appearing a coward.
In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone,
I decided to take my problem to God.
With my head in my hand, I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud.
The words I spoke to God that midnight are still vivid in my memory.
“I am here taking a stand for what I believe is right.
But now I am without strength and courage, they too will falter.
I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left.
I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.”
At that moment I experienced the presence of the Divine
as I had never experienced Him before.
It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying,
“Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.”
Almost at once my fears began to go. My uncertainty disappeared.
I was ready to face anything.” [Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*, 105-6]

It was not Martin’s responsibility to know all the answers
Only Martin’s responsibility to trust that God would be with him.
In the difficult dangerous impossible situations,
God would make a way where there seemed to be no way,

So often it is only when we get to the end of ‘our rope’,
That we realise that the God who seemed to be sitting on the side lines
Is actually the God who has the whole game plan figured out --
The same God who is available to us and any who want to be involved.
When we’re in our darkest nights, it is through our willingness to get involved in God’s plan
That we begin to *know* God.

We begin to know the God who does not insist, but does *persist* –
Persists in all that is good and right and true – all that is divine.
When we are pulled and pushed beyond what we can ‘know’ and control
Then there is a space for God to enter and to be known
And then *God’s* power can become available to us
Resurrecting us from the powerlessness of not knowing.

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Last month our Circuit Stewards and Tony and I reviewed the Mission Plans
Which each of our circuit churches had been preparing for the year 2020.
So many plans and ideas before us about how congregations would grow
In their worship and learning and caring activities
With God and their congregations
Exciting plans and ideas about reaching out into their communities...
The Mission plans also revealed vulnerabilities of several congregations –
Vulnerabilities due to decreasing sizes of congregations or finances
Or aging buildings or lack of volunteers
Churches wondering whether they would actually continue to be viable...

And then the Corona Virus was upon us – something none of us had written into our Plans!

We're now recognising that that MOST of our Mission Plans for 2020
Are not going to happen in the way we had planned.
Some are saying it could be years before 'church as we knew it' will return –
Some are saying it will never be the same,
Indeed, we're beginning to think about whether 'church as we knew it' *should* return.
Perhaps this is the moment that God has been patiently waiting for –
When we are forced to stop *talking* about 'new ways of being church'
And indeed *find* new ways of knowing God
and working out God's purposes in our private and public and communal lives.
Statistics are showing that before the Corona Virus lockdown,
Approximately 6% of the UK population regularly attended worship services.
With online services, nearly 25% of the population is now engaged each week –
And people who were reticent to step inside a church,
Are happy to tiptoe in (anonymously) to an online service
(Research also shows that they're more likely to go on to an online service
Of a church with which they've had some previous personal connection –
So, keep spreading the word to your family and friends!)

And those of our own congregations who previously have been excluded from attending
Because of poor health, are now able to join us on Sunday morning!
The early church used the Roman roads that had been built to spread the gospel –
Are we being prompted to use more intently the digital roads that are now available?
Digital roads for worship, for fellowship, for study, for meetings --
More use of the internet and telephones to check up on our neighbours and family --
to do pastoral care more deliberately.
'New ways of being church' which save us time and money
and save the planet from air pollution!

So, one answer to 'Where is God in this?'
Is that God is meeting us in the places where we have allowed God to be present
Where we have set aside our own ideas
for how and why and when and where Our Plans will happen
and recognise instead the opportunities to be part of *God's* Mission, God's Plan.
God is in the places where we recognise the Resurrections I preached about on Easter Sunday
Resurrections which can only happen in God's timing and in God's strength...

For the God who raised Jesus from the dead,
Who led the Hebrew people out of Egypt
And Ruth and Naomi from famine in Moab
And Daniel from the lion's den
And Sarah from infertility
And Jonah from the belly of the whale
Can raise us up, too.

The God who knew us and our churches and our communities from the beginning
Who knows current our vulnerabilities and our possible futures
Can raise us up, too.
Past all that we had planned.
Past all that we had doubted.

The God who spoke to Martin at the kitchen table at midnight
Calls us to work to for all that is good and right and true in our local situations
In ministry with those in our communities

Who are hurting, struggling, who need someone to be with them,
This God calls us to point them to the God who knows us all and can be known by all,
The God who is *eager* to be known, the God who is eager to bless
One church, one story, one person at a time –

And so we must continue tell each other the stories of how God is with us
And ask each other: ‘where is God in this?’
Because the more we ask and tell each other,
The more we will recognise, we will *know*, that God who is amongst us
Loving us and urging on into the fullness of God’s Kingdom right here on earth.
Amen!

We pray together our prayers of intercession (by Alison Muir):

Eternal God, we come to You now as Your people have done through the ages.
We come in faith and assurance that You hear our prayers.
No matter how small we feel in these uncertain times, we know that You are above all things:
that You are the creator of the earth and the heavens, reigning with wisdom, power and love.
Our hope is in You, in Your love, mercy and grace which flow towards us
and all that You have created.

As we look around at the world today,
we recognise that many people are going through a time of great uncertainty and suffering.
All that they have known seems to be unravelling:
the security and identity they have in the workplace,
the education system which largely prepares young people to take their place in the world;
family and friends are physically separated.
We recognise that this is a time of anxiety for many people,
particularly for those who do not know You.
We hope and pray that, through the upheaval of these days,
You will reveal Yourself to them and draw us all deeper into Your plans and purposes.

As Your church, we pray for the wisdom to see things from Your perspective.
May we find the right balance between “being” and “doing”,
making time to wait upon You and having ears to hear what You would say to us.
As our own lives are being disrupted by current events
and our emotions touched in deeper ways,
may we be increasingly open to the work of Your Spirit
and equipped to reach out to those who are hurting.
We have been reminded this morning how Paul spoke to the people of Athens –
using their statue of an “unknown” god as an opening to speak of You, the one true God.
We pray that You would help us also to recognise opportunities to reach out to people,
and to see ways of making You known through life-giving words and actions.
e see at this time many people in our nation are reaching out to you;
people who wouldn’t usually go to church on Sunday are watching on-line services.
Perhaps these people are like the ones Paul referred to, feeling their way towards You,
and we know that it is Your will that they should find You. This is our desire too.
We pray that you would continue to draw them to Yourself
and show us how we might play our part.

In these unprecedented times, we pray for the members of our government,
that You would cause them to make wise decisions for the benefit of all.
We pray that we will emerge safely from this lockdown period,
having reflected on the type of society we want to build:
a society that will more greatly reflect Your kingdom values.

We pray not only for our nation but all nations of the world:
that people would receive Your physical healing
and find the healing that comes from a relationship with you.
Lord, we know that each person is precious to You.
Let us take a few moments to pray quietly for those people God has put on our hearts.

(Lord's Prayer). Amen.

We sing together, *Creator God*:

1. In the darkness of the still night, In the dawning of the daylight,
In the mystery of creation, Creator God, You are there.
In the breath of every being, In the birthing and the growing,
In the earth and all its fullness, Creator God, You are there.

2. In the homeless and the hungry, In the broken and the lonely,
In the grieving of Your people, Creator God, You are there.
In the tears and in the heartache, In the love through which we serve You,
In the anguish of the dying, Creator God, You are there.

3. In our hearts and in our thinking, In the longing and the dreaming,
In the yearning of our heartbeat, Creator God, You are there.
In the love for one another, In the sharing of our being,
In receiving and forgiving, Creator God, You are there.

4. In our joys, our hopes, our healing, In awakening to revealing,
In Your call and our responding, Creator God, You are there.
In our prayer and in our service, In our praise and in our worship,
In Your love that is eternal, Creator God, You are there.

--Margaret Rizza, StF 109

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May the blessing of the God who created us,
Who knows us, who inspires us,
Be with us and known by us,
Now and in all our times of testing
And all our times of resurrection.
Amen!