

Light and Dark

Sunday 14 March 2021

Call to Worship

Psalm 107

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

I danced in the morning

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth:
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me;
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John;
They came with me and the dance went on:

Dance, then, wherever you may be,
I am the Lord of the dance, said he,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame:
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,
And they left me there on a cross to die:

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black;
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone;
But I am the dance, and I still go on:

They cut me down and I leapt up high;
I am the life that'll never, never die.
I'll live in you if you'll live in me:
I am the Lord of the dance, said he.

Reading Ephesians 2:1-10

From Death to Life

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

I am amazed, God, at the infinite variety of life on this planet we call Earth. From microbes that live in boiling water at the bottom of the sea, to bugs that eat plastic waste, to bacteria that live in our gut and keep us alive. From humming birds that flap their wings 80 times a second, to kiwis who don't use their wings at all. From the weird duckbill platypus to the bizarre pangolin anteater. From the giant blue whale to the tiny nano-chameleon. We are surrounded by wonder and strangeness and beauty. Thank you for the joy we can experience as we look around at your wonderful creation. Thank you for the simple pleasures of watching birds and listening to cicadas, of catching fish and discovering skinks and beetles.

We confess that sometimes we have been neglectful of the life that teems around us. Sometimes that is down to ignorance – we don't know what we don't know. Other times it is wilful. We know what we want and we kill and destroy in order to get our way. Then, when nature fights back, like the rabbits returning to the pastures, we search for ever more devastating ways of controlling the consequences reaped from our past behaviour.

We are sorry, God, that in our self-centred desire to master the planet we have done so much damage. Help us, your church, to be a part of the restoration of the good, good gift you have given us.

We bring our own confessions to you in the stillness.

We serve a good, good God who sees our hearts and freely forgives as we truly repent. May we be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and kept in life eternal through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Reflection – A reading...

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

1. What word or phrase grabs your attention?
2. What do you think God may be saying to you through this passage?
3. How will you live differently as a result of what God is saying?

Notices and Celebrations

The Peace

Celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

Celebrate, Jesus celebrate

He is risen, He is risen

And He lives forevermore

He is risen, He is risen

Come on and celebrate

The resurrection of our Lord

Lord I lift your name

Lord I lift your name on high
Lord I love to sing your praises
I'm so glad you're in my life
I'm so glad you came to save us

You came from heaven to earth to show the way
From the earth to the cross my debt to pay
From the cross to the grave
From the grave to the sky
Lord I lift your name on high

Reading John 3:14-21

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Message Light and Dark

Sometimes life is not as black and white as we would like. As a young person I was convinced that black is black and white is white and there is no such thing as shades of grey. I think that is part of the reason that I would regularly go out to my father's workshop where we would engage in conversations that often ended up in shouting matches as he slowly trained me to think outside my sharp-edged box. My mother hated it, but I will be forever grateful to my Dad for the way he helped to grey my vision and soften my edges. I'm pretty sure that I still have some pretty sharp edges, they're just not as bad as they were.

A really nice example of the need for shades of grey can be seen in photography and related art. Take this picture of the house we saw a few

weeks ago. Here is the colour image. And now here is the same photo in pure black and white. See how much of the detail is lost in the process. Now, if we add in some levels of grey, we can see the detail coming back into focus. Here is one grey between the black and white. Look at how much difference that makes. Here are two levels of grey. And here are eight levels of grey. You can nearly see the colour in the picture at this point.

Now here's the thing. We really need black and white because the tints (white) and the shades (black) are what give a picture depth through contrast. Here is a picture with no black in it. And a picture with no white. It's an extreme example, but I'm thinking you can likely see the point.

It is pretty clear that using the metaphor of light and dark makes a lot of sense when talking about the impact Jesus had when he entered the world. I like to think of it as going out to Dad's workshop to argue a point. I would take with me a particular perspective. It was my take on the world and I wanted to test it out. I should say at this point that Dad would take the opposite perspective, no matter what I wanted to argue. Even if he thought I had a good point, he made me work for it. Let's say I wanted to talk about whether the Treaty of Waitangi was valid for today. In a way I took my own brand of black into the workshop. With patient and sometimes infuriating deliberateness my father would force me to look into the nooks and crannies of my thinking. He would bring light to the naiveties that I inevitably carried into the conversation. I would begin to see that there were textures and hidden details that I had never noticed before.

It's worth noting that there are no shades of grey, let's face it, there's nothing to be seen at all, if we don't have light to begin with. So when the light came into the world it changes things. Let's go back to that photo. With no tint, that is white, how much can you see? Nothing at all. It is simply featureless black. Now we all know that it is possible to negotiate life in the black. Any blind person can show up the possibilities there. We are down the sense of sight, but we can carry on living and have a potentially fulfilling life. Yes, we would be bereft of colour and to a large extent depth and height. I can't speak for the blind, but I imagine that the ideas of horizon, or the red of apples are difficult or even impossible to comprehend on a physical level.

So there must be a similar inability to comprehend the way in which the light Jesus brings to the world can change how we see the world.

Now, to be honest I really struggled with this piece of Scripture. Not because I am by nature rather black and white, but because I have seen the damage that can be done in the world by people whose view of that world is black and white. And on the surface it seems as though this reading from John is throwing us into, dare I say it, a dark ages of us and them, the goodies versus the baddies. And so I had to step back and look for context, for depth, for the nuance that I know God has for us. I began to see that this is not about choosing sides. It is not about forcing people into a particular camp. There is so much more to it than you are good, or you are evil.

Let's come back to our photo. First, without light there is nothing. Then we add light and we can see that something is there. We can tell it is likely a house. Yet aside from lines that are a little askew we can't really tell much more about it. It could be a nice house, or a wreck. It is as we add the greys that the house begins to come into more detail. We can see the holes and the brokenness borne of neglect. And we understand that this is no longer a house that is fit for its original purpose. In the darkness, if we even knew it was there, we would have no idea what condition it was in. With light and shadow we can see it for what it really is.

In the same way the light of Jesus shines in our lives and we can see ourselves for what we truly are. I can't speak for everyone, but to be honest, sometimes that makes me feel uncomfortable. I want to be able to turn the light off and pretend that my flaws and wrinkles aren't really there. Like a blind person given sight who looks and doesn't like what they see, I would kind of like to go back to not seeing, not knowing. I don't want to be exposed for who I really am because it is uncomfortable and challenging.

So what does the phrase, 'those who do evil hate the light,' mean. Am I an evil doer because the light makes me uncomfortable? Is everything a person does evil if they don't do it in the light? Is a good deed done by a non-believer evil by this definition? Or is this saying that a good deed, a true deed, can be done in the light before God by anyone?

Verse 21 of our reading in John says this, 'But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.' I want to put that alongside the familiarity of verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

If we look at these two verses together something interesting stands out. Neither verse insists on a long list of prior requirements for them to be held as true. Verse 21 doesn't require you to confess your sin or belong to a church or read the Bible. Verse 16 doesn't require you to confess your sin or belong to a church or read the Bible. Instead we read – everyone who believes, then those who do what is true. There is no judgement on who everyone is, or who those who do are. That is entirely up to God.

Unfortunately, over the centuries the church has somehow conspired to take these verses and turn them into a bludgeon that separates people into opposing camps. It seems to say, 'If you don't do things our way, then you are clearly evil and living in darkness, condemned and judged.'

I don't think that is what Jesus is intending us to understand. He is saying to us, you must have light on the subject because without the light we cannot tell what is happening. We can't see the good or the bad. We can't see the detail of that red apple or the far horizon. When he goes on to say that those who do evil hate the light I don't think he is talking about everyone who doesn't happen to turn up at church on Sunday. He is talking about people who are intent on breaking relationships and causing damage to people and the world we live in. In a way it harkens back to the creation story. In the beginning God said, 'Let there be light.' And consequently, life and hope came into the world. For sure, it got well and truly screwed up, but it was there.

I love Ephesians 2:8 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. It is a healthy reminder that we are here by God's gift. And if we are here by way of a gift then being in the light is a gift. Which kind of says to me that the only difference between me and 'those who do evil' is a gift. Then from there, those deeds done in the light are done by way of the gift. I have no right to boast. I have no right to point out the failings of others. All I can do is search for ways to invite others into the light. Then, perhaps, the nuances of God's love for me, and for every other person in the world, might become a little clearer.

We Pray

Loving God, we like to call ourselves people of the light. Yet so much of what we say and do we try to hide away because we know it's not up to your standards. Then to make ourselves feel better we express disdain for those who don't fit our definition of good. Forgive us we pray for using your word to push others away, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Help us to be light

bearers rather than light withholders. Teach us to see truly by your light, to pick up the details of your love for us and for all the world. In Jesus name, who is the light of the world. Amen.

To God be the glory

To God be the glory, great things He hath done,
So loved He the world that He gave us His Son,
Who yielded His life our redemption to win,
And opened the life-gate that all may go in.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the earth hear His voice;
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,
Let the people rejoice;
Oh, come to the Father, through Jesus the Son,
And give Him the glory; great things He hath done.

Oh, perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,
To every believer the promise of God;
The vilest offender who truly believes,
That moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Great things He hath taught us, great things He hath done,
And great our rejoicing through Jesus the Son;
But purer, and higher, and greater will be
Our wonder, our transport when Jesus we see.

Offering

Great and generous God, our lives are surrounded by things that steal our lives, inflict and destroy us. The gifts and offering we share with you this day are a way of keeping us focused not on the things that would take life away but will renew our lives: hope, love, compassion, empathy. As the Israelites looked to a serpent on a pole for healing, we look to a Saviour on a cross to be brought back to life. In that holy name, Jesus the Messiah, we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

Gracious and loving God. We bring our prayers before you, knowing that you always hear us. We are small in your sight and have little power in this world. May our prayers move your hands to bring hope and life to those for whom we pray.

We pray for people who struggle to find safe housing. With the cost of housing so high and landlords threatening to get out of rental housing with the law changes it is increasingly difficult for low-income earners to find safe and suitable housing. May justice for the least well off be prioritised.

As we look at the news that 270 million people are facing "a hunger crisis" this year and "famines of biblical proportions" in over three dozen countries we are astounded at the enormous cost to people who have no ability to fend for themselves. Would you bring rain where rain is needed, end fighting where peace is needed that the hungry might be able to eat. We bring our prayers.

We are reminded of the continuing civil war in Syria. Entire communities have been destroyed, infrastructure demolished, and food and medical supplies reduced to trickles. We ask that you bring the fighting to a halt and that those responsible for such suffering, on both sides, are held to account. We bring our prayers.

The erosion of gender equality and steep rise in violence against women and girls as the pandemic continues to rage. Women play a disproportionate role in responding to the virus, including as frontline healthcare workers and carers at home. Women's unpaid care work has increased significantly as a result of school closures and the increased needs of older people. Women are also harder hit by the economic impacts of COVID-19, as they disproportionately work in insecure labour markets. Nearly 60 per cent of women work in the informal economy, which puts them at greater risk of falling into poverty. God of Mary, of Hannah, of Priscilla, bring hope, safety and justice to women all over the world. Hold back the men who are protecting their patch and prepare paths to a life without fear. We bring our prayers.

Those we know and love who are sick, who are travelling, who are far away.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.

[The Lord's Prayer](#)

Our Father in Heaven, holy 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.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

O Worship the King

O worship the King all glorious above,
and gratefully sing his power and his love:
our shield and defender, the Ancient of Days,
pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise.

O tell of his might and sing of his grace,
whose robe is the light, whose canopy space;
his chariots of wrath the deep thunder-clouds form,
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.

The earth, with its store of wonders untold,
Almighty, your power has founded of old;
established it fast, by a changeless decree,
and round it has cast, like a mantle, the sea.

O measureless Might, ineffable Love,
whom angels delight to hymn thee above!
Your humble creation, with glory ablaze,
in true adoration shall sing to your praise!

Benediction and Grace

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.