

WAITAKI PRESBYTERIAN PARISH

March 21st 2021 with Bethne Dodd

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'PICTURE THIS'

Call to Worship: (Verses from Psalm 119)

Happy are those who follow the Lord's commands,

who obey him with all their heart.

I keep your law in my heart,

so that I will not sin against you.

I praise you, O Lord;

teach me your ways.

Be good to me, your servant,

so that I may live and obey your teachings.

Open my eyes,

so that I may see the wonderful truths in your law.

Open the eyes of my heart Lord

Open the eyes of my heart Lord, Open the eyes of my heart

I want to see you, I want to see you

To see You high and lifted up, Shining in the light of Your glory

Pour out Your power and love as we sing holy holy holy

Holy holy holy, holy holy holy, holy holy holy, I want to see You.

Come, now is the time to worship

Come, now is the time to worship. Come, now is the time to give your heart

Come, just as you are to worship. Come, just as you are before your God, Come

One day ev'ry tongue will confess You are God. One day ev'ry knee will bow

Still the greatest treasure remains for those who gladly choose You now

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Compiled from children's prayers and letters to God.

God of our endless questions – beyond all we can envision or imagine – how like small children we can be. All children. Your children. Pushing boundaries, throwing tantrums, only seeing things our own way, wanting our own way. We

need guidance, love & support as we grow. And, whatever our age, as we navigate our all too grown up world, help us not to lose sight of our childlike curiosity, our capacity for joy nor our delight in the wonder of the world in which we live.

God, this is your world. You made us. You love us.
Teach us to live in the world you have made. (Hope)

Dear God -

Thank you for a lovely day and my friends and family.

Sorry for the wrong thing I have done.

You have given us a beautiful world to live in and trusted us to take care of it. Sometimes we don't treat it very well. Please show us how.

Please guard me for ever and please give me sweet dreams. (John)

Dear God –

Please put another holiday in between Christmas and Easter. There is nothing good in there right now. (Ginny)

Please change the taste of asparagus. It is grass. Thanks. (Sarah)

Dear God –

These are the things I like: Going to the movies. Going to see people. Cooking food. Buying things. Flying jets. Boats. Drinking tea. Building things. Christmas. And You. (Spence)

Dear God –

I don't think anybody could be a better God. Well, I just want you to know but I am not just saying that because you are God. (Charles)

It's great the way you always get the stars in the right places. (Jeff)

We read Thomas Edison made light. But in Sunday School they said you did it. So I bet he stole your idea. (Donna)

Dear God –

I am sorry for being a naughty boy. Please make me a better boy tomorrow. (James)

Thank you for my baby brother but what I prayed for was a puppy. (Joyce)

My mummy says all babies cry, but I don't think baby Jesus did. You must know, so please write back. We have a bet. (Angelina)

Dear God –

Are you really invisible or is that just a trick? (Harry)

Did you mean for giraffe's to look like that or was it an accident? (Norma)

Who does your job when you're on vacation? (Jenny)

P.S. You don't have to worry about me. I always look both ways. (Dean)

Amidst life's lighter moments, so necessary for our wellbeing, help us to see what it is we need to bring before you, to say our very own sorry's...

Assure us that as we place our all too common failings in your loving hands you receive them as none other. You don't throw them back in our faces, hold them up for public ridicule, or condemn us. Instead, you remove them, as far as the east is from the west. More than that, you breathe new life into us, give us a new vision of how things can be, all the while declaring us forgiven, in the name of your Son, & our Saviour Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Kids Story: 'Down the back of the chair' – Margaret Mahy

Welcome, Notices & Celebrations

Peace of Christ

Reflection:

Who remembers Andrew's 'chair in a field' reflection?

Last month an empty chair was presented as a means of focus.

Don't know about you, but I initially found myself chuckling – not out of amusement but rather from disbelief, as earlier that week I'd re-read a book which encouraged visualisation via the starting point of an empty chair. And so we have today's Service. We're going to revisit that focus, with a twist. All that's required, your willingness and imagination. This unfolds in a series of 3 points of silent reflection.

You'll notice a chair today, placed within our worship space. You can either focus your attention on that physical chair or the one on screen, which may make life easier. Alternatively, imagine in your mind's eye chair. What's it like – straight-backed, reclining. What's it made of – wood, upholstered material.

Take a few moments to picture your chosen chair.

Once you've have that, now chose a person you know well. Familiar to you.

Known by you. You have history. Once you've decided who that is, have them come out of the wings of your imagination and move toward the chair. As they settle into it, notice as much as you can about them. Gain a picture of them.

Their movement, their body language, posture and demeanour. Their clothing and idiosyncrasies. Their expression as they make eye contact. How do they

seem. How do they look. Comfortable, pleased to see you. A little uncertain, quizzical. Do they have a ready smile, folded arms, crossed legs. Along with their appearance gauge their felt sense by recalling the relationship you have with them. What you've shared together, what you know of one another.

(Silence)

Have your chosen person get up and walk out of picture, leaving the chair once again empty.

We're going to repeat the process now with another person. But to make it a little harder this time that person is you.

In a similar way as before, imagine watching yourself walk toward the chair and sit down. What's your gut reaction. Your first impression. The felt sense of yourself. How do you respond to yourself. With criticism or welcome. Do you look nervous, or at ease. Do you steadily meeting your own gaze. Do you notice anything about yourself you may not have done before. *(Silence)*

Have yourself stand up and move away, again leaving the chair empty.

For the final time, keep your thoughts focussed on your empty chair. I'm going to ask a question. I don't want you to answer it. Use the silence that follows to reflect on whatever comes to mind.

Here's the question. ***'When you think of God – what do you see?'*** *(Silence)*

For now, file away whatever may have come to mind. Mentally put away the chair and we'll continue.

SONG: *Be thou my vision* (WOV 455 v1,2,5)

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
I ever with thee, thou with me, Lord;
thou my great Father, I thy true son;
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

High King of heaven, after victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O ruler of all.

Readings: *(Good News Version)*

Jeremiah 31:31-34 A New Covenant

The Lord says, “The time is coming when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand and led them out of Egypt. Although I was like a husband to them, they did not keep that covenant.

The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. None of them will have to teach their fellow countrymen to know the Lord, because all will know me, from the least to the greatest. I will forgive their sins and I will no longer remember their wrongs. I, the Lord, have spoken.”

John 12:20-33 Some Greeks seek Jesus

Some Greeks were among those who had gone to Jerusalem to worship during the festival. They went to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said, “Sir, we want to see Jesus.”

Philip went and told Andrew, and the two of them went and told Jesus.

Jesus answered them, “The hour has now come for the Son of Man to receive great glory. I am telling you the truth: a grain of wheat remains no more than a single grain unless it is dropped into the ground and dies. If it does die, then it produces many grains.

Whoever loves his own life will lose it; whoever hates his own life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever wants to serve me must follow me, so that my servant will be with me where I am. And my Father will honour anyone who serves me.

Jesus speaks about his death

“Now my heart is troubled – and what shall I say? Shall I say, ‘Father, do not let this hour come upon me’? But that is why I came – so that I might through this hour of suffering. Father, bring glory to your name!”

Then a voice spoke from heaven “I have brought glory to it, and I will do so again.”

The crowd standing there heard the voice, and some of them said it was thunder, while others said, “An angel spoke to him!”

But Jesus said to them, “It was not for my sake that this voice spoke, but for yours. Now is the time for this world to be judged; now the ruler of this world

will be overthrown. When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to me.” (In saying this he indicated the kind of death he was going to suffer.)

Message: ‘PICTURE THIS’

“When you think of God – what do you see?” That question (I asked earlier) was originally asked of 4-12 year olds, from a wide range of backgrounds. Their responses were compiled into a book entitled ‘OMG – How children see God’ by author Monica Parker (2015) Let’s hear what they had to say.

Anything. Everything. God is air. God is Spirit. God lives in nature.

The creator of the earth. The light of the world. An angel of light.

He’s a girl. A superhero. A 24/7 Helper.

God has giant ears so he can hear everything we are saying.

God is like a transformer, turning into anything he wants.

But my personal favourite has to be a 9year old lad who suggested –

God needs someone to take his picture so we’d know what he looks like.

Maybe he could take a selfie?

However much we try to describe God, no sharply focussed photograph exists – for which we should remain eternally grateful. God is infinite. Utterly different. Beyond anything we are capable of imagining. Doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try.

So - How did you picture God?

As human beings our God concept ranges from faces and figures to nature – planets in space, sunlight, thunder and lightning, the sea, sky, mountains and trees. Through to abstract colours, shapes and symbols – a heart, a circle, a spiral, a cross.

It seems we all have a mental image of God, or at least a gut reaction to the word itself. During our earlier Reflection - for some us, at least, hearing that word may have ushered in feelings of uncertainty, the unknown – tis mystery all.

For others more negative feelings may have arisen – disappointment, guilt, fear. If so, chances are we view God as somewhat critical, authoritarian or distant.

While others still may have had a sense of peace, comfort, security – which hints at a more benevolent experience.

Whatever our response - likely a mixture of all of the above and more besides – the amazing thing is not one of us sees things in exactly the same way, for

not one of us experiences life and faith in exactly the same way. We are each unique, with a uniquely different vision of God.

This is part of the reason why we need each other. Our varied faith and life experiences are all are vital in gathering as fuller picture of God as is humanly possible. As Paul's prayer to the Ephesians says... *"I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, **so that you, together with all God's people,** may understand how broad and long, how high and deep is Christ's love. Yes, may you come to know his love – although it can never be fully known – and so be completely filled with the very nature of God."* (Eph3:17&18)

However tempting the thought might be to do faith in isolation, we can't begin to fathom the depths of God's great love shown in Christ Jesus entirely on our own. We're told even together with all God's people, we won't fully understand. Doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

One of the people who sought to share God's vision was the prophet Jeremiah. A uniquely sensitive soul, this deeply emotional man often found it taxing to deliver God's difficult to swallow truths to those around him. Nevertheless, he remained faithful to his calling. And, in the end, left us with words that saw beyond his troubled times to the day when God would do something new. Usher in a new covenant relationship based on unconditional love. The kind of relationship that would begin by placing the law directly within them, by intimately writing it upon their hearts – the very seat of will and understanding.

Another of God's people, John, shares his own unique far reaching vision in the opening chapter of his Gospel where he describes Jesus as the Word and source of life. With God. The same as God. He then reveals how this Word - which is an expression of thought – became a human being, and full of grace and truth lived among us, became one of us. And while acknowledging that no one has ever fully seen God – no selfie's yet available – still, the only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (Jn1:1-4,14,18)

Paul, yet another of God's people, expresses the same concept only in a different way. Elegantly stating, in his letter to the church at Colossae, *"Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God."* (Col1:15)

While the unnamed writer of Hebrews introduces us to Christ Jesus who *"...reflects the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of God's own being..."* (Heb1:3)

A likeness is an impression, an image, a representation of the external form of a person. *In* Jesus we see the external expression of God. While *through* Jesus our experience of God's love becomes less of a blur and is brought more into focus. And the more we continue look at Jesus, the more we continue thinking about how he lives and loves, acts and reacts, the more clearly we come to see God's heart.

In our earlier New Testament Reading, when a bunch of Greek guys rock up wanting to see Jesus, they get more than they bargained for – the truth. Through images relating to grain and wheat Jesus explains how gain and growth is most often found through death and sacrifice – which will prove painful. That the best is most often found in the giving up of self, in following and serving - which will prove difficult. The majority were no more ready to hear straight talking truth then, than they were in Jeremiah's time. Are we any better?

Then Jesus broaches death – his death. Giving us an example of what he'd just shared - that what is right will prove costly. In brutal vulnerability he reveals how his own heart is so troubled he actually asks God the Father not to let that suffering come upon him. But in the very next breath he looks beyond that suffering – acknowledging it as part of what is to come. He prays that in and through such suffering glory may be brought to God's name.

It's at this point an audible response is heard by the gathered crowd – a voice from heaven. Again, more than they bargained for. Like the rest us they try to interpret what it is they just experienced. Thunder, an angel or something else they can better understand.

Stop for a moment to consider the implications of the kind of God we could easily fathom, whom we could fully grasp, whom we could hold in palm of our hand. This would leave little, if no space for wonder and awe, curiosity, questions or growth. In reality, reduced to our level of basic understanding, In the wake of God speaking, Jesus says it was for their sake such a voice was heard. He then closes by presenting them with another image. That of him being lifted up from the earth and by doing so drawing everyone to him. Quite some claim from one whom many would continue to view as no more than a Jewish man – even to this day.

Like it or not. Accept it or not. We learn God's love is personified in Jesus, in the Word become flesh, living as a Jewish man – a fact we should view as far from limiting. For God is no more or less likely to be encountered today in the

form of a Jewish man than a Pacific Island woman, an Asian child, an elderly Sikh gentlemen, a Muslim neighbour.

This is because, as human beings created in God's image, in essence we all have the ability to reflect aspects of God's glory. As such, it's in this first-hand, tangible, word-become-flesh way, that we're most likely to encounter God. It's a sobering thought – but just as we experience God through others, so others experience God through us. Personified through our actions, our words, our presence – no matter what time and place we live in. Whatever our physical appearance or internal make-up. Whatever gender we purport to be. Whatever our age or stage of life, our status or state of health. Whatever we consider limits us – does not limit God. Whatever defines us – does not define God. God is beyond all definition. Doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

In Summary – we've touched on...

- How we each picture God
- How together we picture God
- How in Jesus we see God
- How others see God through us

With this final point in mind I conclude our message by reading a poem I've shared before. This time, as a form of prayer.

The Christ Instead (Author Unknown)

Not only in the words you say,
Not only in your deeds confessed
But in a most unconscious way
Is Christ expressed.

Is it a heavenly smile?
A holy light upon your brow?
Oh, no, I felt His presence while
You laughed just now.

For me 'twas not the truth you taught,
To you so clear, to me so dim,
But when you came to me you brought
A sense of Him.

And from your eyes He beckons me,
And from your heart His love is shed
Till I lose sight of you – and see
The Christ Instead.

SONG: Immortal Invisible (WOV 80)

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.

Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light,
nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might;
thy justice like mountains high soaring above,
thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.

Great Father of glory, pure Father of light,
thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight;
of all thy rich graces this grace, Lord, impart -
take the veil from our faces, the veil from our heart.

All laud we would render: O help us to see,
'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee;
and so let thy glory, Almighty, impart
through Christ in the story, thy Christ to the heart.

Offering

God of compassion, when we failed to keep your commandments and rebelled against that which would bring peace and joy to our lives, your love was so great that you offered us a new covenant – not written on tablets, but on our hearts. In our giving, and in all our offerings, may it be our lives, our love and devotion that we bring to your altar. May we remember in our giving that you loved us so much that the sacrifice of your Son on the cross for us was not too great a cost. Our gifts are meagre in comparison, but let them remind us of what you gave first. In Christ, our Saviour and Redeemer, we pray. Amen.

Prayers for ourselves & others

Based on a prayer by Reverend Julia Seymour, <https://revgalblogpals.org/2021/03/12/friday-prayer-62/>

For those who are out of words for praying

Those who stare off into the middle distance, too tired for sentences or sense.

Those whose grief is too deep for anything but sobs and deafening silence.

Those who have poured out for others with very little available to fill themselves.

Those who have deconstructed lies they were told and are gently holding the hope of mystery.

Those who are looking at the anniversaries of atrocities and know that some lying lips say, "Never again."

Those who pray by putting on foot in front of the other and that is enough.

Those with spirits aching for a dinner party, a vacation, a relaxed perusal of a store or a market.

Those with hurt so deep it can only be expressed as anger.

Those with aging pets, struggling family members, as yet undisclosed symptoms of pain or illness.

Those with loved ones visited through the internet, from far away, or only in their hearts.

Those who just want to sing.

Lord, have mercy.

For those who keep looking for hope and cannot see it

Those who survived the mosque shootings in Christchurch and long for an end to the grief

Those who mourn the loss of innocence, of a sense of safety walking down the street, who fear who or what might be next

Those who survived the Christchurch earthquakes and long for an end to the grief

Those who ache for the loss of loved ones, for jobs, for homes

Those who hunger for food, for friendship, for a safe space

Those who long for the comfort of a simple touch

Lord, have mercy.

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

SONG: Shine Jesus Shine (*Graham Kendrick*)

Lord, the light of your love is shining
In the midst of the darkness, shining
Jesus, light of the world, shine upon us
Set us free by the truth you now bring us Shine on me x2

*Refrain: Shine, Jesus, shine Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze Set our hearts on fire
Flow, river, flow, Flood the nations with grace and mercy
Send forth your word, Lord, and let there be light.*

Lord, I come to your awesome presence
From the shadows into your radiance
By the blood I may enter your brightness
Search me, try me, consume all my darkness Shine on me x2

As we gaze on your kingly brightness
So our faces display your likeness
Ever changing from glory to glory
Mirrored here may our lives tell your story Shine on me x

Spoken Blessing

"I pray that you may have your roots and foundation in love, so that you, together with all God's people, may understand how broad and long, how high and deep is Christ's love. Yes, may you come to know his love – although it can never be fully known – and so be completely filled with the very nature of God."
(Eph3:17&18)

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us now and forevermore. Amen.