

Stumbling Block

Sunday 31 October 2021

Call to Worship

Psalm 146

Hallelujah! O my soul, praise God!

**All my life long I'll praise God,
singing songs to my God as long as I live.**

God made sky and soil,
sea and all the fish in it.

**He always does what he says—
he defends the wronged,
he feeds the hungry.**

God frees prisoners—
he gives sight to the blind,
he lifts up the fallen.

**God loves good people, protects strangers,
takes the side of orphans and widows,
but makes short work of the wicked.**

God's in charge—*always*.

**Zion's God is God for good!
Hallelujah!**

I serve a risen Saviour

Alfred Henry Ackley

I serve a risen Saviour, He's in the world today.
I know that He is living, whatever men may say.
I see His hand of mercy; I hear His voice of cheer;
And just the time I need Him He's always near.

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me a
Along life's narrow way.
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives?
He lives within my heart.

In all the world around me I see His loving care,
And though my heart grows weary, I never will despair;
I know that He is leading, Through all the stormy blast;
The day of His appearing Will come at last.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian, Lift up your voice and sing
Eternal hallelujahs To Jesus Christ the King!
The Hope of all who seek Him, The Help of all who find,
None other is so loving, So good and kind.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Bethne Dodd (October 2021)

God of Creation

of Spring growth, wildflowers, weeds and wonder,
we worship You.

Nature's provision blankets the land – new life abounds.

The air hums with insects, alive with birdsong – catching heaven in a note.

God of Creation

of psalms and symphonies, harmony and hope,
we worship You.

Reflections of Your glory are hidden within the everyday.

A child's drawing.

A kind gesture.

A loving word.

Bare feet in grass, in sand, in sea.

Masked smiles and crow's feet eyes.

Wherever we encounter wonder.

Wherever we discover inspiration.

Wherever creativity flourishes.

In all areas of life and work and leisure,

we worship You.

Whenever we fail to

appreciate wonder or express creativity.

Whenever we stifle inspiration

or restrain the work of the Holy Spirit

within our own lives, or the lives of others,

may God forgive us.

We pause to silently bring before God our private confessions...

Thankyou for reminding us
when we confess our failures, mistakes and wrongdoings,
You are faithful to forgive then renew us in Your love.
You who makes all things new,
we worship You.
Amen.

Reflection – What is Church

Four images that may or may not be church.
What is Church?
Where is Church?
Who is Church?
When is Church?

Notices

The Peace

How great is our God

Chris Tomlin

The splendour of a king, clothed in majesty
Let all the earth rejoice, all the earth rejoice
He wraps Himself in light and darkness tries to hide
And trembles at His voice, trembles at His voice

How great is our God
Sing with me how great is our God
And all will see
How great, how great is our God

Age to age He stands and time is in His hands
Beginning and the end, beginning and the end
The Godhead Three in One, Father, Spirit and Son
The Lion and the Lamb, the Lion and the Lamb

Name above all names, worthy of all praise
My heart will sing how great is our God

Reading Mark 9:42-50

⁴² “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Message Stumbling Block

God, as we dwell in your word today, open our eyes to your heart for us, and for those around us. Open our hearts and minds to what your Spirit longs to do among us. Create in us a joy and a peace that honours you in all we do. Amen.

Today I want to begin in the middle. I think it is helpful to have some definitions to work with before we get too deep into things.

First up is the term, ‘little ones.’ It is easy and common to mistake, ‘little ones’, for children. Here, Jesus is talking about his followers, his disciples. In a sense it is a term of endearment that is used to refer to anyone who believes in him. Notice too, that Jesus is talking to his followers. In other words, this story is toward believers and about believers. It’s an in-house thing.

Second, it is important to understand that the story makes use of a rhetorical device called hyperbole. Hyperbole is using over the top exaggeration to make a point. For example, ‘If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a million times.’ Or, ‘I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.’ The statement is obviously not true, but the effect is to leave the listener in no doubt that you are serious about what you are saying. So when Jesus says, ‘If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off...’ he is not literally meaning to go out and cut off your hand. Quite apart from the fact that your hand is not the cause of your sin, walking around without it will do no good anyway. The hyperbole here is to get you to think about the seriousness of sin and its effect on your relationship with God. Hopefully that makes a modicum of sense as we go along.

What do you instantly think of when you hear the term, stumbling block? Is it a brick sitting on a path? A piece of Lego on the carpet? Or is it a problem on the way to a solution? Whatever your image, it likely includes some kind of pain or distress. The doorhandles in my house are set at just the right height that if I get my aim wrong and walk too close to the door they catch me on my upper arm and because of the design of the handles they can leave quite a bruise if I am moving at speed. They're not exactly a stumbling block, but they have a similar effect – they put me off course and change my focus. If it is a particularly painful encounter I sometimes end up not doing what I had set out to do because I am more interested in getting over the pain.

Stumbling blocks are definitely to be avoided if at all possible. If you see something on the ground that is likely to cause someone to trip it is good practice to move it out of the way. That is particularly true as people get older. It becomes much harder to recover from a fall as we age and so keeping those things that cause us to stumble out of the way matters.

Of course, stumbling blocks are not confined to physical elements. There are many things that can cause us to stumble in life. They range from difficulty reading to physical impairments to people getting in our way to things that are said that cut us to the bone. I'm sure you will be able to think of someone who has dyslexia and struggles to read as a result. Getting in with a group of people who lead you astray is another example. Alcohol and drugs are obvious stumbling blocks. Less obvious can be childhood experiences, dimly remembered but affecting everything we see in the world.

There are many potential stumbling blocks that litter our path. Some of them are just a part of the world – like tree roots on a walking path. There is no-one responsible, no-one to blame, they exist for the purpose of maintaining the life of the tree and our job is to pick a path through or around them. These are not the kind of stumbling blocks Jesus is talking about.

The stumbling blocks Jesus is talking about are those things that are thrown out deliberately to trip up and damage. In particular it is those things that are designed to trip up other believers. Of the kind I spoke about last week. Those believers who fit our particular way of thinking or being. Paul talked about it in 1 Corinthians 8:9, 'But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.' There can be a strong temptation to throw out road blocks to make it more difficult for people.

Imagine someone comes to church. They have just begun a relationship with Jesus. They have just started a sexual relationship with someone of the same sex as themselves. They speak very differently to you. They have none of the norms of behaviour that allow you to feel comfortable.

Do you, A: March up to them and tell them to get their life sorted, or B: Embrace who they are, as they are and love them as Jesus would?

Now, before you say, well obviously B, let me tell you that it is not the easy path. Much easier to make them feel unwelcome so they go somewhere else. Unfortunately the anti-gay, anti-women, anti-sex, anti-abortion, anti-put anything you like here, part of the church has been ascendant for a long time. They make a practice of putting up stumbling blocks for people who desperately need some kind of hope. Just like the disciples complaining to Jesus about the other person doing healing in Jesus' name there seems to be this attitude that it's our way or the highway. I think it is these for whom the millstones are designed.

Now imagine someone who doesn't come to church. They meet casually with some other people who believe in Jesus. They want nothing to do with the institutional church. They don't sing. They don't appear to have any kind of leadership. And they would like to use the church building for some kind of family oriented gathering. Do you, A: Treat them like any other secular organisation, or B: Treat them as sisters and brothers in Christ and go out of your way to serve them.

I could go on about this quite easily. I think I have deleted more than I currently have left. I would rather we spent a little time thinking about how we might be a people who remove stumbling blocks. I don't think that is an easy task. We all know how frustrating it is when the road is being repaired and we have to wait at Stop/Go signs for what can seem like ages. My son-in-law has responsibility for running some of those sites and the abuse he can cop on occasion is quite spectacular. I think this is why Jesus uses the hyperbole – he wants us to understand that this is serious, and it comes with its own consequences.

But let's pause for a moment. What would it look like if we took on the role of removing stumbling blocks? How would we recognise those stumbling blocks? What might we do to remove them? How could we help people who have already fallen over them? What might the church look like if it was focussed on removing stumbling blocks? What might be some of the costs? What about the

benefits? What of the risks? Take some time to think about it, maybe talk with your neighbour.

Will you commit to being a stumbling block remover?

We Pray

Loving God. We live in a world full of stumbling blocks. Some of them are natural and it is part of life to navigate our way around them. Many are made by human hands and attitudes. We confess that sometimes we are the ones who create those stumbling blocks and we are sorry. Teach us to live in ways that smooth the way for people to come to know Jesus. And give us eyes to see those stumbling blocks we can repair so others might come into your presence with joy. Amen.

Good, Good Father

Chris Tomlin

Oh, I've heard a thousand stories of what they think you're like
But I've heard the tender whisper of love in the dead of night
And you tell me that you're pleased
And that I'm never alone

You're a Good, Good Father
It's who you are, it's who you are, it's who you are
And I'm loved by you
It's who I am, it's who I am, it's who I am

Oh, and I've seen many searching for answers far and wide
But I know we're all searching
For answers only you provide
'Cause you know just what we need
Before we say a word

You are perfect in all of your ways
You are perfect in all of your ways
You are perfect in all of your ways to us

Oh, it's love so undeniable
I, I can hardly speak
Peace so unexplainable
I, I can hardly think
As you call me deeper still

As you call me deeper still
As you call me deeper still
Into love, love, love

Offering

From <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/>

Holy God, architect of the universe, you have wonderfully made every delicate intricacy of this world! Then you placed human beings in the centre of it, as we stumble our way through living our lives in union with your will and in harmony with creation. As we offer our tithes and gifts this morning, we thank you for sending your Jesus to show us the way in simple language: loving you with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and loving our neighbour as we love ourselves. May our gifts be dedicated toward making both a reality. In Christ we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

The Church

As the church is placed under the microscope by the wider community it is often found wanting. So often what is said does not match what is done. Faith is sometimes used as a license to do things that are not reasonable or kind. Help us to learn how to be holy.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

While Covid continues to rage, in New Zealand and around the world those other concerns like Climate Change and lack of healthy housing also continue unabated. We pray into this broken world as it groans in anticipation of Jesus' return.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Our Community

We are conscious of the rise of drug related crime in our community. Often related to poverty and failure in the wider society we are each and all responsible for what we do about it. We ask for insight into how we can act differently to support people, young and old, to live well.

Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

Ourselves

We bring our own struggles, our hopes and dreams, our fears and worries.
Those we love, our families, our friends, our pets. Be present with us, Lord.
Lord, in your mercy

Hear our prayer

All these things we pray in the precious name of Jesus, who taught us how to pray...

[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

[Take my life and let it be](#)

Frances Ridley Havergal

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee
Take my moments and my days
Let them flow in ceaseless praise

Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of Thy love
Take my feet and let them be
Swift and beautiful for Thee

Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from Thee

Take my silver and my gold
Not a mite would I withhold
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as Thou shalt choose

Take my will, and make it Thine
It shall be no longer mine
Take my heart; it is Thine own
It shall be Thy royal throne

Take my love; my Lord, I pour
At Thy feet its treasure-store
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for Thee

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.