

twelvebaskets



ORDINARY 21A

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Ordinary 21 - Year A
27th August 2023



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

552 STF – Here am I, Lord OR

331 STF – King of kings, Majesty

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

536 STF – He's got the whole world in his hands OR

317 STF – At the name of Jesus

Readings: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Hymn:

463 STF – Deep in the shadows of the past OR

547 STF – Beyond these walls of worship

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

689 STF – Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity OR

691 STF – What shall our greeting be: sign or our unity?

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

683 STF – Great is our redeeming Lord OR

356 STF – Jesus shall take the highest honour

Blessing

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Call to worship

God of all grace,
We come into your presence this day,
Turning aside from all the distractions of our own lives,
To be present to you and to worship you,
This and every day

Amen.¹

Hymn:

552 STF – Here am I, Lord OR
331 STF – King of kings, Majesty

Opening Prayers

Lord,

We come before you today with grateful hearts. We thank you for the gift of another day. We acknowledge that we do not deserve your grace but you give it to us freely because you love us. Help us to understand that your grace is sufficient for us and that we do not need to be overwhelmed. We come to you with our anxieties and ask that you carry them for us.

As we gather to worship you today, we pray that you will fill this place with your presence.

In Jesus name, we pray,

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

If licensing permissions are in place, watch a little of 'Frozen 2' where Anna realises that all she can do is 'the next right thing' - [YouTube](#)

Otherwise introduce this idea with a story from personal experience:

Or retell part of the OT reading through the character of Moses' mother finding a courageous way to act in the face of the order to throw her baby son in the river.

Then offer some scenarios (such as those below) & invite suggestions from any members of the congregation about what they could do in that position:

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Georgie Blyth

- A new child joins your class who speaks a different language, some people just ignore them... what could you do?
- A friend at school has stopped speaking to you and whispers about you to their new friends when they see you... what could you do?
- An elderly resident in your street often gets cross and shouts at children passing on the way home from school... what could you do?
- The government's hostile environment towards those seeking asylum or refugee status has led to acts of vandalism at the flats near your church where some people from Syria are living... what could you do?
- Someone in the congregation has stopped coming to church because they don't agree with a decision which has been taken... what could you do?³

Hymn:

536 STF – He's got the whole world in his hands OR

317 STF – At the name of Jesus

Readings: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Hymn:

463 STF – Deep in the shadows of the past OR

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Reflections on the readings

Perhaps you have heard the mantra, 'Act as if it all depends on you, pray as if it all depends on God'? It expresses something of the essence of today's bible passages, that the whole story of God's involvement with humanity is exactly that, a story of involvement, combining human agency with divine activity.

Take this ancient story of the birth of Moses, for example. The story opens with an explanation that times have changed; from being welcome guests in Egypt under the leadership of Joseph, (a superhero who saved the Egyptians from famine as well as rescuing his family and enabling the survival of the Israelite people) the Israelites are now despised immigrants, hated & feared by the Egyptians. In this year when we mark the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush to British shores, perhaps we hear sad & sinister overtones? A race invited to come and settle in these islands soon find themselves shunned... and worse. The evils of racism overshadow all of human history.

The new Pharaoh, who doesn't remember Joseph & doesn't seem to know his own history sets the Israelites to harsh and cruel labour, but when they continue to flourish despite this, thinks up an evil plot, the murder at birth of all Israelite boys. Again, we think forward to the birth of Jesus and to the similar atrocities ordered by the jealous and paranoid king Herod. Perhaps this story was in Herod's mind when he gave his

³ All Age Talk written by Jill Baker

orders, but, if so, he seems to have forgotten that it didn't work then either. For these cruel, self-centred leaders are not operating in a moral vacuum. They are operating in a world created and sustained by God, a world in which God is still alive and well and at work. There are no thunderbolts (just yet) but God's purposes are made known in the courage, faithfulness and ingenuity of God's people. The Egyptian midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are the first to stand up for goodness over evil as they defy Pharaoh's orders and let the baby boys live, courageous indeed. God sees and rewards their actions. Then the mother of Moses, later named as Jochabed, makes her stand against tyranny, showing great ingenuity as she obeys the order to cast her baby son into the river Nile, but first lays him in a cleverly constructed basket which will keep him safe at least for a little while. She does what she can and makes space for God to act. Perhaps what happens next seems curious, coming through an 'enemy', but only an Egyptian could save this baby now. One more courageous female plays a role in this story as Miriam, the sister of Moses, keeps watch over her little brother and, when he is discovered, ensures his continuing care by suggesting his own mother nurses him! A great saga of people having the courage to 'do the next right thing', despite the presence of evil in their world.

Today's psalm recalls a later part of the story of Moses, the dramatic escape of the Israelite people through the Red Sea, of which they could well say, 'the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us', (v4) had it not been for the activity of God. But the opening verses fit our story too, 'If it had not been the LORD who was on our side —let Israel now say— if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us, then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;...' (vv1-3) finishing with the claim of all faith in every age, 'Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.' (v8).

The story may be ancient, but it still speaks today... like Shiphrah and Puah, Jochabed and Miriam, we live in a world which is often cruel and unjust and which can seem godless. But we do have choices, there are actions we can take to demonstrate that God has not abandoned humanity, we can find ways to be loving, courageous, bold, ingenious. We don't need to give up and fall into despair, indeed, it's vital that we don't.

Does this way of looking at the world fit with our readings from the New Testament? I think it does. In Romans, Paul is urging the Christians in Rome, who may have experienced persecution and discrimination themselves, not to give up, not to slip into a lifestyle which is no different from that of those around them, but (in Gandhi's words), to 'be the change they want to see'. Life around may be perplexing, disturbing or seem utterly void of God, but by allowing their minds to be renewed by God, they can tune into the presence and purposes of God even in the midst of challenge. These verses too still have relevance and power for us today – even when we feel powerless to effect large-scale change, we can discern God's ways and live them out, demonstrating goodness in the face of evil.

Paul goes on to elaborate on one particular way in which the Christian community can and must live differently from wider society. In our relationships with one another there is to be no self-aggrandisement, no superiority, no regarding others as less important. We form one body, comprising many parts. Returning to the Exodus passage for a moment and setting this picture of the body alongside, perhaps we notice that the midwives, the mother and the sister of Moses all had different roles, different actions to take, to allow goodness to triumph. In any given situation today, we will not all be called to act in the same way, but all demonstrations of God's goodness and nature

are needed, valued and part of the bigger picture. We value what others bring to the story, not just what we bring.

The verses we read from Matthew 16 are a critical turning point in the story of Jesus's ministry. Entering Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples what people are saying about him, and then probes more deeply... how do they themselves regard this man with whom they have travelled around, witnessing miracles and signs, receiving attention and adulation from many, but also suspicion and hostility from others. Perhaps we might see this conversation as Jesus asking his disciples whether, in the midst of all their busy activity, they have been able to discern the presence and activity of God in Jesus?

Peter has and, as so often, he is the first to speak up, claiming that indeed Jesus is 'Son of the living God'. This declaration leads to Jesus's first mention of the church, the community built around that claim which will become the body of Jesus on earth, making known the activity of God whatever the circumstances. Through the church, this collaboration between God and humanity will continue.

So our actions, our words, our lifestyles and choices today fit into this continued, unfolding tapestry of human agency and divine activity. What we do matters, and we are called to do what is right and just and good. But it's not our fight only, God is still holding the canvas and offering us threads of grace and justice to weave into the picture. So let's 'Act as if it all depends on us, and pray as if it all depends on God'. Amen.

Questions for reflection or discussion in small groups. You might like to give each group two or three questions to look at and then compare answers after 6 or 7 minutes?

1. How do you respond to the idea that we should 'Act as if it all depends on us, and pray as if it all depends on God'?
2. Do you think there is a parallel between Egypt's treatment of the Israelites and racism in Britain today?
3. How comfortable – or not – are you with the sentiment expressed in the psalm that the LORD is 'on our side? What might it mean for our current situation?
4. What contemporary stories can you think of where people have defied authority and power to do what they believed right? Have you ever been in this position?
5. What are the traits of society today to which you don't want to 'conform'?
6. In your own local situation, does Paul's picture of the body work out?
7. If you had to answer Jesus's question, 'But who do you say that I am?', what would you say?
8. What, if anything, do you feel you could do differently in order to weave more grace and justice into the world's tapestry?⁴

Hymn:

689 STF – Summoned by the God who made us rich in our diversity OR

691 STF – What shall our greeting be: sign or our unity?

⁴ Reflection written by Jill Baker

Prayers of intercession

This prayer involves moving our hands and arms if able. There will be moments of quiet where I encourage you to bring your own personal prayer to God.

Starting this prayer with the palms of our hands down and resting on our lap.

God who forgives, with our hands down we come to your feet. We offer you the things we shouldn't think, or do. Or things we just cannot hold on to right now because it hurts to do so. This might be unhealthy thoughts, wants or actions. A fear, a relationship or something else that we know is wrong. We ask for forgiveness for these things but also strength to fight the battles in our personal lives.

[moment of quiet]

Next turn your hands over, with palms facing up.

God who provides, with our hands ready to receive we ask that you give us gifts needed to better your kingdom and ask that you guide us in our church and community in the work that we do for you. Ask God to provide what you need, even if you do not know what that is, be open to receive from Him.

[moment of quiet]

Now, bringing our hands to our chests we pray for loved ones.

God who loves, we offer to you the people who cannot be with us this morning due to illness, work or reasons only known to you. We pray that you heal them, and keep them safe. We pray that they feel your presence and love wherever they are. We pray for our loved ones who are yet to know you. We know that you love them and accept them for who they are. We pray that you meet them wherever they are on their journey. Think of a person or more who you know that needs a prayer. If you cannot think of someone, ask God who you should pray for or pray for the person next to you.

[moment of quiet]

Now, with our arms outstretched we pray for the world.

God who created the world, we are sorry for not being good servants and protecting your world. We pray for places where there is poverty and people in need, in this country and around the world. We pray for areas where there is war and conflict, in people's homes and home towns. We pray for areas where there is persecution, where people cannot worship freely or be themselves. Think of a place in the world that needs God's help.

[moment of quiet]

Finally, with our hands together we offer these prayers to you.

Faithful Father, we bring these prayers to you and ask for your help in our lives and the lives of others.

For this is your kingdom and we worship and serve you,

Amen.⁵

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Georgie Blyth

We will now take up the offering.

Gracious God, we bring you all that we have and are. As we commend to you these gifts, we also offer you our whole lives – use us to see your will be done, your kingdom come,

In Jesus' name

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

683 STF – Great is our redeeming Lord OR

356 STF – Jesus shall take the highest honour

Blessing

Lord of all hopefulness,

Lord of all joy,

Lord of all we have and are,

Inspire us by your Spirit to be a part of your mission.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker