

twelvebaskets



EPIPHANY 6A

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

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Epiphany 6 - Year A
12th February 2023



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

553 STF – I am a new creation OR

609 STF – As we gather in your presence now

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

74 STF – For the music of creation OR

775 STF – Ewe, thina (We walk his way)

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Hymn:

499 STF – Great God, your love has called us here OR

493 STF – Come, Lord, to our souls come down

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

671 STF – What shall we offer our good Lord OR

455 STF – All my hope in God is founded

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king OR

503 STF – Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

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Call to worship

Gracious God, we are your people, seeking to know you more.

Gracious God, come amongst us, by your Spirit, that we might be transformed by our encounter with you.

Gracious God, may we go from this place, recognising you in every place and every moment.

Amen.¹

Hymn:

553 STF – I am a new creation OR

609 STF – As we gather in your presence now

Opening Prayers

As we are gathered, Jesus is here.

As we pray and worship and learn together, Jesus is in our midst.

The Christ who is God-made-human and the human is holding all of creation together in his divinity, we welcome you, by your Spirit, into our presence.

Come Lord Jesus,
Come Lord of light,
Come Prince of peace,
Come Creator God and creative Spirit.
Come.

We bring our whole selves to worship this day, and in the stillness, we just take a moment to still our minds, quieten the distractions, to focus on you, Lord God.

[Pause].

Amongst all the distractions of this day, Holy God, show us how to focus on you.

[Pause].

We bring our whole selves to worship and today we bring thankfulness – we bring all that we are grateful for, the blessings and gifts we have received, even if we failed to acknowledge them at the time.

Let us share with one another for a moment now: what are we most thankful for?

[Invite congregation to share a few things people are thankful for].

Lord – hear our shouts of gratitude to you, for we are truly thankful.

We bring our whole selves to worship, O God, and we recognise that we bring our failings too. In a moment of stillness, we come before you to say sorry, for all the things we have done wrong, all the moments we have failed you.

[Pause].

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

Holy and gracious God, we know even as we come in prayer, that you have already forgiven us. You love us just as we are, and you set us free from all sin and shame. Today we hear again the words of comfort: 'you are forgiven'.

Thank you Lord, for your grace and mercy.

Thank you for the hope we carry in our hearts,

In Jesus' name we bring these – and all our prayers,

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

[Activity Prep: Various paper love hearts, to write down prayers. Have the words "Philia", "Philautia", "Xenia", and "Agape" written out on A4 paper].

Is everyone looking forward to Tuesday? Does anyone know what Tuesday is?

[Take responses from the congregation]

Yes! It's going to be Valentine's Day! A day where people celebrate love by giving a gift to the one they love, asking someone they like out on a date. Love is something that we all do, but the word love has so many different meanings. We Love our family, we love whatever sports team or teams we follow, we love Dr Who, we love a sunny day. For all these different feelings, we use the word 'love', but I guess we all know we mean something a little different in English.

The English translations of the Bible use the word 'love' a total of 686 times, but in the original Greek language that the New Testament was written in, they had different words for different kinds of love.

[Bring out the words prepared previously. Have the congregation try and guess the meanings. Then share the information below:]

Philia is the love that we have between friends.

Philautia is the love we have for ourselves, self-love and self-care.

Xenia is the love that we have for strangers and guests, such as welcoming foreigners into our homes.

Agape is perhaps one of the most important ones for us as it's the love between us and God.

[Place the Words for Love in an easy to reach space at the front].

Love in all its different ways are important, and we shouldn't forget to love one another this Valentine's day in ALL the different kinds of love, not just the romantic kind. To help us remember and for our prayers today we're going to write love notes in all the

² Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

different kinds of love and bring them to the front, so that just as these people are on our hearts, so too will they be on God's heart as well.

[Encourage people to come forward, to write prayers. In silence or with soft music while this happens.

After everyone has done their prayer, read the following prayer].

God of Love, help us to love others as you love us. Take what is on our hearts and may they be encompassed by your love and know you.

Amen.³

Hymn:

74 STF – For the music of creation OR

775 STF – Ewe, thina (We walk his way)

Readings: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Hymn:

499 STF – Great God, your love has called us here OR

493 STF – Come, Lord, to our souls come down

Reflections on the readings

One of the great questions we have to ask, as we study the Bible, listen to the Word of God, and learn what it means to try to follow Jesus, is to work out what to do with the bits of this tradition that make us uncomfortable. Do we lean into the discomfort and challenge ourselves to be better, to strive for a higher standard, to be counter-cultural, or do we say 'some of this is of its time' and needs to be context bound? Usually it's a bit of a mixture of the two, right?

This week's readings give us plenty of chance to think about this issue. What do we do with all this?

Nadia Bolz-Webber, American writer and thinker, has preached on this passage from Matthew. Here's what she has to say:

'Our obsession with moral absolutes comes from clinging to the letter of the law as though it can love us and save us when really that's what Jesus is for. What Jesus seems to be doing here is reminding us of the spirit of the law so that we know how to love one another.'

It is a question that keeps coming up in Christian history: what do we do with 'the law', the Old Testament, in light of Jesus' life, death and ministry? Now that the law has been replaced by relationship, how much use is the law? We still have it, we don't wish to disregard it all together, but perhaps we have to treat it differently. In fact, Nadia helps us to see – perhaps we treat rule-making differently entirely.

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Annan-Hood

The Christian tradition has always been good at rules, at law-making, at 'thou shalt not' and 'don't do that'. Of course, there is room for this, and we all need some boundaries to help us live by. But I think what Jesus is doing here is showing that no amount of rule-making, policy-writing or law-giving will make us better people or show us how to love. It doesn't matter how far the laws go – they can never go far enough – to help us understand what love looks like because it, to quote the final few lines of T S Eliot's *The Four Quartets*, is 'costing not less than everything'.

So a rule about murder can never go far enough, because hurting someone with words isn't loving at all either. Rules about adultery and sexual misconduct can never go far enough, neither can those about divorce or oath-making and oath-breaking. As Nadia points out – Jesus exaggerates for effect here, and shows us that we are invited into relationship, not law-abiding.

Of course, good relationships need boundaries, rhythms, understandings of what is and isn't acceptable, patterns of forgiveness and apology. But good relationships are almost never defined by law, but rather by love.

In the Narnia stories, Aslan – the Christ-figure – is put to death by the wicked White Witch, who is following the laws as she understands them: that where there has been treachery, someone must pay for it with their life. What the White Witch is unaware of though, which Aslan knows about is the 'deep magic before the dawn of time', which means he cannot be killed and returns to life in C.S. Lewis' beautiful fictional recreation of the Easter story. The law is not enough to contain Aslan's act of self-sacrifice, his love, his desire to ensure that no one else suffers. Love conquers over law.

Can you think of an example where this has happened in your own life? Or a relationship that you have which could not be defined or contained by a list of rules? Spend a few moments talking to the person sitting next to you about it, if you feel comfortable doing so.

[Give people a few minutes to share with each other.]

Paul's letter to the Corinthians picks up on this idea – about how we are journeying with and growing in relationship with God all the time. That our relationship is not defined by rules, but by our commitment to following, to learning, to growing. Paul refers to the church as a little baby, eating only milk and not yet ready for solid food, but as their relationship with God grows and they discover more of what following Jesus the Christ is like, they too will grow. Not by following the laws, but by deepening the relationship.

Where is your relationship with God at the moment?

Is it largely defined by rules, or by love?

How do you view God and do you see the divine as interested only in 'thou shalt not' or do you see God as inviting you to learn more about love?

Spend a few minutes in quiet reflection by yourself thinking about that.

[Give people a few minutes to reflect, and if appropriate ask one or two people to share their initial responses to the questions. It may be helpful to repeat the questions part way through and then hold another minute or two of quiet].

And finally, that takes us to Deuteronomy – one of the books of the Torah, the ancient Jewish law that defines much of the Old Testament. And this is where we recognise that it is not just a New Testament idea to put love at the heart of faith – this is an ancient Hebrew concept which Jesus picks up and the Gospel writers and Paul bring to the fore, but which is there from the beginning. Ever since the creation story, God has been inviting us into relationship, to get to know something of the divine better and to experience the universal truth: God is love.

In verse 16 we read:

‘For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.’

Lots of chat about laws and commands in here, but at the heart of it is this invitation to ‘love the Lord your God’. Can we do that again today? Can we commit again to learning to love God. To accept that we are loved and accepted, just as we are, and that we too can love in return.

And, when we love God, what we know from the whole experience of reading Scripture and following Jesus, is that this love leads to action. It helps us love our neighbours, our friends, our family, the whole world. Our love for God shapes our love for those around us, and the whole of creation. We could spend a lifetime writing laws that define how we do that, and it would always feel limiting, like restriction, like reduction. Love, however, gets bigger if you give it away.

So let’s be people of love again this Sunday, this week, this Valentine’s day, and beyond...In Jesus’ name.⁴

Hymn:

671 STF – What shall we offer our good Lord OR

455 STF – All my hope in God is founded

Prayers of intercession

Today, our prayers of intercession are made up of three periods of quiet, in which we will bring our own prayers to God, our own invitation to look for God’s love at work in the world around us, and to be an answer to someone else’s prayer.

Firstly, I invite you to call to mind somebody close to home who needs our prayers this day – perhaps someone in your own family, a close friend, or a member of this church community. In a moment of quiet, just hold that person’s name, or face, or situation, before a loving God.

[Pause]

⁴ Reflection written by Tim Baker

Loving God, show us the way to care for those we know,
And let our hearts be tuned to love.

Secondly, I invite you to call to mind a person or situation further afield, which needs us to pray today. It might be something you have read about in the news, or a story that has found its way to you, but which you feel you need to pray for. Hold those people, that situation, before a loving God.

[Pause]

Loving God, show us the way to care for our world, and all those who call it home,
And let our hearts be tuned to love.

Finally, I invite you to spend a moment praying for the church – perhaps this Church here in this community, perhaps the wider Methodist circuit or the church in the world. Let's hold God's people before a loving God.

[Pause]

Loving God, show us the way to be a people who bring about the change we want to see in the world,
And let our hearts be tuned to love.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

Gracious God, accept these gifts. May they, and each of us, in your hands, be put to use to make this world a better place, a more loving place, where all are accepted and know they are loved.

In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

264 STF – Make way, make way, for Christ the king OR
503 STF – Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

Go from this place inspired,
Go from this place renewed,
Go from this place with the Spirit of God alongside, within and all around you,
Go from this place, a child of the Living God.

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker