

twelvebaskets



EASTER 6B

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

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Sixth Sunday After Easter (Vocations) - Year B
5th May 2024



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

401 STF - Come, sinners, to the gospel feast OR

439 STF - Abba Father

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

552 STF - Here am I, Lord OR

668 STF - Teach me, my God and King

Readings: 1 John 5:1-9, John 15:9-17

Hymn:

331 STF - King of Kings, Majesty OR

343 STF - All my days I will sing this song of gladness

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

293 STF - All heaven declares OR

363 STF - My Jesus, my Saviour

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

487 STF - You shall go out with joy OR

503 STF - Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

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Call to worship

The Spirit of God says "come".

Jesus Christ, the bride of the church, says "come".

Let anyone who hears this say "come".

Let anyone who is thirsty, thirsty for the water of life, come.

Come, all are welcome,

The Spirit of God is in this place.

Amen.¹

Hymn:

401 STF - Come, sinners, to the gospel feast OR

439 STF - Abba Father

Opening Prayers

For our prayers, we will offer a simple "call and response". When I say "God of love and light", can you join me in saying "Guide us in your ways."

Let us pray.

God of love and light.

Guide us in your ways.

God as we gather in worship today we remember those who are not here because of ill health.

We pray for restoration, and for you to show us how to minister to those around us who are suffering.

God of love and light

Guide us in your ways.

As we look around the world, broken and crying out for your promise of peace, we pray for war-torn countries and those who are suffering at the hands of natural disaster.

God of love and light

Guide us in your ways.

God we pray for our elected representatives, locally and nationally. We pray for laws and policies to be created that allow fullness of life for all. For those who are in poverty and experiencing oppression we pray for justice.

God of love and light

Guide us in your ways.

As we encounter those who don't know the promise of the cross, the fullness of life that you bring and the joy in the promise of your Kingdom,

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

God of love and light

Guide us in your ways.

Finally, God, we pray for one another. That we might continue to seek you, to find you in even the most unlikely of places, and to demonstrate your love and light to those we encounter.

God of love and light

Guide us in your ways.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

There is a game as old as the hills themselves, a game which has been played in every youth group, uniformed organisation and school in all likelihood. The game is a simple one, so simple it feels as if it should be impossible to get it wrong or get "out" as you play. The instructions are clear, if you follow the instructions then you should have no problem.

The trouble is, as the game progresses, as the players get more and more excited about playing, the more likely it is that mistakes are made. The only reason you make a mistake in this game is by failing to pay attention, by ignoring the instructions and acting before you think. Whether the person leading is calling out the instructions or signing them or if they flash up on a projector screen, all you have to do is follow them.

If, and only if, the instruction begins with "Simon says...".

It sounds so easy, doesn't it? But it is easy to get carried away, to think you heard or saw "Simon says..." and to follow the next command only to find that you are one of only a few patting your head and rubbing your tummy.

There are times when it seems like Christianity is a big game of "Jesus says...", rather than "Simon says...". Everyone is so keen to start doing what they think that they are commanded to do that sometimes they end up doing something which was not what Jesus asked at all.

Maybe they are being judgmental because they think that some people should not be part of Jesus' family. Perhaps they are being greedy, holding on to money which they think should be theirs because God has blessed them. Perhaps they think that God only wants them to come to church on a Sunday and the rest of their time is for them to use as they want.

Do you know how you win at "Simon says..."? You pay attention, you wait and you think about the instruction. Following what Jesus says is the same: You pay attention to the command, wait a moment, think about it. Did Jesus say it? Just as in the game of "Simon

² Opening prayers written by Lucy Zwolinska

says...", if Jesus didn't say it then don't do it. If Jesus did say to do it though, what do you think that you need to do? That's right, do it! Jesus' commands are easy to recognise because they all sound the same. They all sound like love.

In the gospel reading we are about to hear Jesus said, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love ...

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

We need to listen for the sound of love in the command.

Amen.³

Hymn:

552 STF - Here am I, Lord OR

668 STF - Teach me, my God and King

Readings: 1 John 5:1-9, John 15:9-17

Hymn:

331 STF - King of Kings, Majesty OR

343 STF - All my days I will sing this song of gladness

Reflections on the readings

When we read this passage we can think, "Where on earth do I start? We have to keep all Christ's commands or we are out? I thought that salvation was through faith not works?"

Is that what Jesus was saying? Perhaps this was Jesus' way of asking, "Have you all been paying attention? Do you understand what this means? I'm going soon and I need to know that you get it." Perhaps it was about more than following rules, perhaps it was a bit more about the why we do what we do.

Jesus was telling his friends this after they had shared a meal which represented the Passover, an act of remembrance of Jewish history when God – through Moses – led the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom.

Jesus took that retelling and read new context into it, telling his friends how his coming sacrifice would lead the world out of slavery and into freedom. This is the context into which the instruction to obey Christ's commands comes. After the Israelites escaped Egypt they received commandments from God, ten of them, telling them how to live in their new freedom. So, after Jesus leads us by his sacrifice into freedom, we too are given commandments.

³ All Age Talk produced and published as part of Vocations Sunday resources by the Methodist Church with copyright to Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2024.

When Jesus is telling his friends that if they love him and God then they will keep his and his father's commands, it was an instruction of how to live in the freedom of the kingdom of God. You love Jesus? Love God? Great, then do as they command. There are 613 Jewish commandments, the Mitzvot. Was Jesus telling them that the only way to remain in his love was to keep all 613 commandments?

What a final message to his friends that would be. What a weight on their shoulders as they saw him pick up his cross and head up that hill. What a weight on our shoulders if we are to follow him.

The answer to this lies in the letter from John, which is the first reading set for today. Did you catch it? In 1 John 5, verse 3 John writes, "For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."

In the Disney movie *Encanto*, there is a character called Luisa. She is immensely strong and, along with her magical family, she helps her village. The trouble is that, being strong, she tries to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders, and in her song, (because it is Disney, of course she has a song!) the cracks begin to show. She talks, or rather sings, of how under the surface, the pressure of trying to be all things to all people, keeping everyone safe and happy, is weighing her down to the point that she is going to break. She questions if she has what it takes to do the job of carrying it all.

Jesus knew a thing or two about carrying burdens. He told people that if they wanted to be his disciple, they needed to pick up their cross and follow him – this sounds like a massive burden, doesn't it? But what if Jesus meant this to be freeing rather than burdensome?

In our Gospel reading Jesus says that "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends," so maybe this is more about our living than dying, giving your living self in love. Elsewhere when Jesus talks about carrying burdens, he talks more about them being light. When he sends his disciples out on mission, he tells them not to carry a load of stuff with them, just themselves. Another time, when teaching those around him, Jesus said: "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

The yoke meant something to those listening to Jesus. Although a yoke was known as an agricultural instrument, pulled by animals like oxen in ploughing fields, it was a symbol of a burden, and sometimes oppression. God had warned the Jewish people that they would end up with a yoke of iron, in slavery to their enemies, if they didn't stick with God in joy and gladness.

Sometimes it was a burden of duty and responsibility, as is the yoke of the Jewish law. It was the tradition; it was the norm.

Every Rabbi had their own yoke, and it was that teacher's interpretation of the law (the Ten Commandments and the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy). It was a yoke of service to the law and how they thought you should follow it, that they placed on their disciples. Their teachings often would emphasise all the duties and sacrifice the law demanded and how difficult it was. Jesus said this of the teachers who made following God harder: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi” (Matthew 23:2-7).

Those leaders would take the law and add pages of supplements about how you should keep it and what it all meant. So, the Ten Commandments became hundreds. One, then 1a, 1b, 1c and so on... coupled with every command that could be found in the Hebrew Bible. Not for Jesus though. When someone asked him which were the most important commandments, he took all the law and the commandments and instead of piling on extra instruction he said: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

That’s it, not the 613 laws of Moses plus all the commentary. Two commandments: Love God, love others and the rest will follow. This is the easy yoke of Jesus, the cross-beam he would have us pick up, lay across our shoulders and carry. Jesus was telling people that if you spend your lives working your socks off trying to keep the letter of the law, you will wear yourselves out and never manage to keep it. What Jesus offered was a different yoke, an easy yoke. Let me teach you a new quick and easy Greek word that you can use to impress your friends and wow at parties. Where it reads ‘easy’, the greek word is *chrestos*, which has many meanings like good, kind and easy, but in relation to a yoke it meant ‘fitting’.

An ill-fitting yoke rubs and chafes: you can imagine how this would be more distracting than helpful, constantly needing to shift your position to keep it comfortable. Jesus’ commands about how to live would fit people’s lives, they would not chafe or rub or bruise, they would enable them to do what they were called to without being weighed down, and like a yoke on an ox they would guide the believer the right way.

These are the commands which Jesus would have us keep to remain in God, in the kingdom, in our freedom. Love: love God, love humanity. The words of our Gospel reading were recorded by John. These are the words of Jesus, it is true, but it was John who recorded them, and he is clear that he didn’t write every word of Jesus. At the end of the Gospel he writes: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25).

Paper was an expensive thing and writing by hand took time. So why did John repeat what had already been clearly said? It is thought that John the Apostle wrote this book, because he was there to hear the words of Jesus first-hand. In his Gospel, the word ‘love’ appears 57 times, more than Matthew, Mark and Luke combined and then a further 46 times in the first Epistle of John. Love is the central theme running through his writing.

According to the theologian William Barclay, “‘God loves Christ, Christ loves God, God loves humanity, and Christians love God through their love for Christ’. Christians are bound together through their mutual love, which is a reflection of their love for Christ.” After spending all that time following Jesus around, John was left with one defining message which he thought the whole Church needed to take to heart, to wear as a badge, a banner under which to march: love.

Today is Vocations Sunday, it is a time in our Church calendar when we think about calling. We can get quite caught up in our heads about calling and vocation and ministry, as if they are reserved for the special select few who will go on to slide a white strip of plastic through their collar and step out into the world representing the Church and speaking for God.

This is simply not true. Every person who gives their lives to God, accepts Jesus into their heart and becomes a citizen of God's kingdom, has a calling. A calling guided by our following of Christ's command to love. Love is the uniform we wear as we step into the world following our calling.

A uniform has a purpose. If you are a Scout or a Guide you wear a uniform; school children wear uniforms; police officers, soldiers and road maintenance people, they all wear a uniform. The uniform serves several purposes. It tells you that you belong to something, it tells teammates that you belong with them, it tells others who you belong to and what your values are, and it can protect you while you do what you are called to do.

We wear a uniform of love, and in our own individual calling we represent the Church and we speak of God. Jesus wanted to be sure that the world would be in no doubt who his followers were. Not by their riches – for they were mainly poor fishermen, women, and unemployed tax collectors. Not by their righteousness – they would continue to get things wrong, to make mistakes. Not by their sinlessness – for only Jesus was without sin. Not by their passing judgment on others, being exclusive or keeping people out. Not by unparalleled holiness or purity. No, they would be known as his by the love they shared and the love they show.

By being the embodiment of the two greatest commandments and the command he gave them. Love the Lord your God with everything that you have – mind, body, soul and spirit – and love your neighbour as you should love yourself.

Love one another as I have loved you. Love. Love extravagantly like the prodigal father greeting his lost son. Love with such impartial extravagance like the Good Samaritan caring for one who would hate or scorn them. Love with the dedication to our call that Philip the deacon did; telling the official from Ethiopia, a eunuch, a foreigner, of the love of God for them. This is the love we are called to share!

Love unconditionally like God loves. Love, because God first loved us.

Amen.⁴

Hymn:

293 STF - All heaven declares OR

363 STF - My Jesus, my Saviour

⁴ Reflection produced and published as part of Vocations Sunday resources by the Methodist Church with copyright to Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, 2024.

Prayers of intercession

God of all grace,

In the stillness, we lift our world to you

Holding in our hearts places where people are affected by poverty, injustice, conflict and the greed of others.

May the seeds of justice germinate and righteousness begin to blossom and flourish,
So that all may know your abundant love.

Oh Lord, hear our prayer.

[Silence]

God of all love,

We pray for the places we call home - our own towns, cities, villages and communities. We are holding in our hearts places where isolation has left people suffering, poverty and homelessness which impacts people's chances of fulfilling their potential, dreams wither and die.

Lord God, may your love flow afresh through these places, so that all may know your promise of fullness .

[Silence]

God of love,

Help us to be an answer to prayer this Vocations Sunday.

Life-giving God, today let us pause for a moment to pray for the church.

Plant in us a dis-ease with all that stifles your Holy Spirit from moving amongst us. Help us to find grace in conversation, wisdom in committee, joy in connection, possibility in mission. Join us to the everlasting flow of your limitless love, we pray.

[Silence]

God of love,

Help us to be an answer to prayer this Vocations Sunday.

We pray for ourselves and the concerns of our hearts,

Let us lift our prayers for ourselves to God in the stillness .

[Silence]

Loving God, today we are ready to respond to you. We are here, we are listening, we are longing.

Re-wild us with Your ever-flowing grace and set us free to love as you first loved us, we pray in Jesus' name,

Amen.⁵

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

We will now take up the offering.

Gracious God, we give you praise for your goodness to us. Take these gifts and the gifts of each of our sense of calling and vocation, and use them in the ongoing transformation of the world, in the name of all that is good, and right, and just and loving.

Amen.⁶

Hymn:

487 STF - You shall go out with joy OR

503 STF - Love divine all loves excelling

Blessing

Go and enter into the flow of love that is at work in the universe.

Go and discover that God is out there, moving, transforming, touching lives and all creation.

Go and discover the ways in which you are invited to join in with the dance of the divine.

May you go and encounter the Spirit of God.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker