

Salford Methodist Circuit



2nd Sunday in Lent - Faith - 28th February 2021

Anita Shepherd

Good Morning and welcome to friends old and new joining us for our worship from Salford Methodist Circuit.

Call to Worship

When Abraham chuckled and Sarah laughed

God promised them life

When Abraham wondered and Sarah hoped

God promised them joy.

We tell the story of God's love and laughter

We rejoice in the promises of God.

As we gather together round our digital devices let us remember the claim of Jesus that "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." We may not be able to be together physically at the moment but we can be together spiritually united in our Lord whose presence is with us wherever we are. Let's remember that as we sing or listen to "Be still, for the presence of the Lord".

Hymn : Be Still

*Be still for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear:
in him no sin is found –
we stand on holy ground.
Be still for the presence of the Lord,
the Holy One, is here.*

*Be still, for the glory of the Lord,
is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned:
how awesome is the sight –
our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord,
is shining all around.*

*Be still, for the power of the Lord,
is moving in this place;
he comes to cleanse and heal,
to minister his grace:*

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*no work too hard for him –
in faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord,
is moving in this place.*

Prayers

Holy God, we come from our busy lives.
We often forget that you walk with us.
As we gather now, help us to be more aware of who you are.
Give us the courage to admit when we don't understand,
so that we may grow more like you in all we do. Amen.

Our prayer of confession and forgiveness:

Gracious and patient God – we hope!
There are times when you must feel
That we were sent to try you
With our prejudice, our apathy, our intransigence,
And our refusal to receive the grace
That we are made whole by the cross of our Lord.

Forgive all our ingratitude, our small-mindedness, our stiff necks,
And bind up our brokenness.
We are without excuse,
But bold to ask pardon
From our Lord who lived his life
And died his death
And gave his flesh and blood
For the forgiveness of our sins.
Let us share silence
And consider where we have gone wrong:

[Silence]

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
This is his gracious word: "Your sins are forgiven"
Amen. Thanks be to God

Lord's Prayer

*Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.*

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*Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.*

Bible Reading: Genesis 17 1 : 7 & 15 - 17

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to him and said, " I am God Almighty; serve me faithfully and live a blameless life. I will make a covenant with you, by which I will guarantee to make you into a mighty nation."

At this, Abram fell face down in the dust. Then God said to him, "This is my covenant with you: I will make you the father of not just one nation, but a multitude of nations! What's more, I am changing your name. It will no longer be Abram; now you will be known as Abraham, for you will be the father of many nations. I will give you millions of descendants who will represent many nations. Kings will be among them!"

"I will continue this everlasting covenant between us, generation after generation. It will continue between me and your offspring forever. And I will always be your God and the God of your descendants after you. Then God added, "Regarding Sarai, your wife—her name will no longer be Sarai; from now on you will call her Sarah. And I will bless her and give you a son from her! Yes, I will bless her richly, and she will become the mother of many nations. Kings will be among her descendants!"

Bible Reading: Romans 4 : 13 - 25

For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")-in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence

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the things that do not exist. Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become "the father of many nations," according to what was said, "So numerous shall your descendants be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead (for he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.

Therefore his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.

Bible Reading: Mark 8 : 31 - 38

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Today's Old Testament reading is part of the story of Abraham and Sarah and reminds us of the covenant that God made with Abraham to make him the father of many nations and which he renews at periods in Abraham's life. This covenant promise finally comes true when Abraham is over 100 years old and Sarah bears him a son, Isaac.

Between the first meeting of God and Abraham and the birth of Isaac the relationship between God and this elderly couple involves a lot of trust and faith. To begin with God asks them to leave their home and go travelling where he



leads them to the land that he will give to them and their descendants and then they need faith and trust in God's promises when he says they will have a child. In her reflection on this passage from Genesis the writer Barbara Brown Taylor says that they went taking everything they owned "except a map, because there wasn't one. God's voice was the only map he had, and he and his wife Sarai learned to live by it." They may have had their doubts about what God was asking them to do. And as they uprooted themselves and travelled there may have been rocky moments in their relationship with God but the fact that they went, following God's lead until they finally reached the place God wanted them to be shows their belief in God's promise. They had faith in their Lord and trusted him to do right by them, to guide them and protect them.

Having said that it still must have been a daunting prospect and I'm not sure that if I were in my mid seventies I'd want to be as compliant as Abraham and Sarah and pack up everything and move to goodness knows where.

It's this faith and trust in God and his promises and purposes for us, even though we don't know what they might be that is the link between our readings.

The passage from Paul's letter to the Romans refers back to the covenant between God and Abraham, when he promised to make him the Father of many nations and that eventually the whole world would be blessed through him.

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in approximately AD57 to the Christians in Rome and believers everywhere. The purpose behind it being to introduce him to the Romans and give a taste of his message before he himself arrived in Rome. In order to do this, Paul used an organised and carefully presented statement of his faith.

In Paul's time many Jews were asking the question "How can a man enter into the right relationship with God so that he too may inherit this great promise?"

This promise was given to Abraham because of the faith, trust and confidence that Abraham had shown in God – and not because Abraham had, as William Barclay puts it, "piled up merits by doing works of the law".

The Jews own answer to the above question was that a right relationship with God was obtained by earning and acquiring merit in the sight of God which was done by carrying out good works as set down in the law. This merit was earned by the efforts of the individual.

As far as St. Paul was concerned this attitude towards the promise God made to Abraham totally destroyed it because no one can fully keep the law and live such a perfect life. If receiving God's promise to us through Abraham depends on keeping the law then the promise can never be fulfilled.

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To Paul the fulfilment of God's promise was dependant on two things. The first being the free grace of God and the second being the faith of Abraham. God's promise to Abraham made out of the goodness of his own heart and was unconditional. At the time that God made his promise to Abraham both Abraham and Sarah were elderly and past the age of having children but Abraham took God at his word and believed that his promise of a son was true and it was this willingness to take God at his word that put Abraham into a right relationship with God. In his commentary on this passage William Barclay tells us that the essence of Abraham's faith at this point was that he believed that God could make the "impossible possible."

Paul latches on to the promise given to Abraham and stresses to his listeners that the only way to have a right relationship with God is through faith and trust in God that he will fulfil his promises.

God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the earth was fulfilled through our Lord Jesus who died to "take away the sin of the world" as we read in the gospel of John chapter 1 verse 29. Jesus' death wasn't just for the Jewish people, he died to "save us all" as Mrs Alexander put it in the hymn "There is a green hill far away".

The fact that we are in a right relationship with God purely because we believe in him and his promises got me thinking about our faith journeys, especially the beginning of them. I'm sure that many of us watching today were baptised or christened as babies or small children and brought up in an environment where both at home and attendance at Sunday school we learnt about God and to love and trust him. As we grew so too did our knowledge of God and our faith in him. As children and young people our faith in God started to develop before we became aware of the idea of doing what might be termed as "good works". Therefore the early part of our faith journey can be seen as an example of having a right relationship with God through trusting faith. This is what St Paul was trying to get across to the early Christians in this particular part of his letter to the Romans.

From the disciples reaction to Jesus' teaching about his forthcoming suffering and death the impression we get is that they have lost their faith and belief in him, even though Jesus has just asked them: "Who do you say that I am" and Peter has come straight out with the reply "You are the Messiah".

We may think that Peter's being rather bold and outspoken to rebuke Jesus is the way he does and it appears that he is the spokesperson for the group on this occasion, but we need to remember that the disciples were human, ordinary men and women like ourselves with very human fears, worries and feelings much like our own. Peter's outburst is spontaneous and a purely human one. He's not taking God's purposes into consideration at all. We also need to remember that Jesus' talk of his suffering and death and being the suffering servant as prophesied by Isaiah is not the way that the Jews had been

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accustomed to think of the coming Messiah. They were expecting a king who would come and lead them into battle against their oppressors, the Romans and who, following victory would rule over them as King David and King Solomon had done previously. All this talk of the Messiah being the suffering servant and Jesus' way of changing things by turning society upside down as it were, where the last came first and the first were last were completely alien ideas to them. A Messiah who changed things by what we might refer to as "winning hearts and minds" wasn't what they were expecting at all.

This passage also contains an example of Satan trying to tempt Jesus through one of his closest friends as it is Satan who has made Peter rebuke Jesus. William Barclay describes this as the most terrible form of attack that Satan can use – as we'd only expect support and encouragement from those whom we love and trust when we're making a decision to follow a particular course of action.

This form of temptation is still very much in evidence today – especially amongst young people, although it's not exclusive to this group. It's their peers who will tempt and actively encourage them to try alcohol, smoking, drugs or to get into some form of trouble with the law and not every young person is strong enough to resist the temptation. Even though they may know the difference between what's right and wrong, the desire to be accepted and be a part of the crowd can be too strong to resist some times. Anyone who's ever had experience of being on the outside of a group and wishing they were a part of that group will know how it feels to be the odd one out and the desire to be part of the crowd.

The latter part of this passage from Mark's gospel shows us that in order to follow Jesus our faith in him needs to be strong as not only do we need to put others before ourselves at all times but we have to be aware that the Christian journey isn't all sweetness and light. Following faithfully in the footsteps of our Lord means that we have to be prepared to take risks, to suffer and to be challenged by him to follow where he leads us and carry out those tasks he wants us to do in order to bring about his kingdom here on earth, in Salford, in the 21st Century.

We don't have an actual cross to carry that is just a metaphor for some burden we carry in our lives. For some it maybe coping with an illness or disability, for others it maybe caring for someone who ill or disabled, it could be problems at work or at home or unemployment. All of us have times when we struggle to cope with whatever life has thrown at us and sometimes this affects our faith because we feel God has abandoned us. It's at these times that we need to remember that God never leaves us he is always there and as it says in the well-known poem "Footprints:"

*"he spoke, "My Precious Child, I Love you and would never leave you...
When you only saw one set of footprints that was when I carried you."*

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We, like Abraham believe and trust in a God who brings life from death and as far as us having a "right relationship with God" is concerned we can use Abraham as our role model. If we have faith and trust in God we can believe his promises and we will inherit that promise which God gave to Abraham and which has been passed down through the generations of believers throughout the world since then. Over the past year we have trusted God to sustain us and be with us through the pandemic and he's been with us and countless people worldwide during this terrible time and through our faith we know he will continue to be so as we slowly come out the other side. With the arrival and approval for use of the various vaccines since December last year there is an end in sight and by now many people will have received their first dose of vaccine giving us hope for an eventual return to some sort of normality but there's still a long way to go and we have to be patient and have faith in the process of rolling out the vaccines not just here in the UK but across the world.

Are we, as members of the Body of Christ in the 21st Century prepared to follow the examples of Abraham, Sarah and St Paul and take risks for our faith, to move out of our comfort zones and our church premises when we can use them again, to go out there in faith and with guidance of Jesus in the form of the Holy Spirit and take the gospel to those who have yet to hear it. Not just by word of mouth but by deed as well - acts of kindness speak of the love and care of Christ as much if not more, than words.

Our next hymn, helps us to reflect on the type of Messiah Jesus was to be.

Hymn: From heaven you came

*From heaven you came, helpless babe,
entered our world, Your glory veiled,
not to be served but to serve,
and give Your life that we might live.*

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

*There in the garden of tears
my heavy load He chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
"Yet not my will but yours," He said.*

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

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*Come see His hands and His feet,
the scars that speak of sacrifice,
hands that flung stars into space
to cruel nails surrendered.*

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

*So let us learn how to serve
and in our hearts enthroned Him,
each other's needs to prefer,
for it is Christ we're serving.*

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
to bring our lives as a daily offering
of worship to the Servant King.*

We come now to our prayers of intercession which will be followed by our final hymn, 'We are marching in the light of God'

Let us come before our Lord in prayer.

Let us prayer for the faithful
God, our strength and our salvation,
We remember before you
Those who put their faith in you.
We pray for those whose faith is being tested
By suffering, loss, or persecution.

In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who lead others along the path of faith,
For ministers, teachers, parents and for ourselves.

In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for those without faith.
God, our strength and our salvation,
We remember before you
Those for whom faith is not a living reality.
We pray for those for whom faith has no meaning
And life no real purpose before it ends.



In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

We pray for those who have lost the faith they had,
And feel angry, bereft or betrayed.

In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

Let us pray for the gift of faith.
God, our strength and our salvation,
We confess before you
That our faith is fickle and weak.
We pray that you will steady our faith
So that we may live and love for you.

In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

We pray that you might strengthen our faith
That we may take up our cross and follow Christ.

In your loving mercy: **Hear our prayer.**

In the name of Jesus Christ, given up to death for our misdeeds and raised to life for our justification. **Amen.**

Hymn: We are Marching

*We are marching in the light of God,
we are marching in the light of God
We are marching in the light of God,
we are marching in the light of God
We are marching, oh,
we are marching in the light of God,
we are marching, oh,
we are marching in the light of God.*

*We are living in the love of God,
we are living in the love of God.
We are living in the love of God,
we are living in the love of God.
We are living, oh,
we are living in the love of God,
We are living, oh,
we are living in the love of God,*

*We are moving in the power of God,
we are moving in the power of God.*

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*We are moving in the power of God,
we are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, oh,
we are moving in the power of God.
We are moving, oh,
we are moving in the power of God.*

Jesus calls us to leave the past

Jesus calls us to hope.

Jesus calls us to travel lightly

Jesus calls us to faith.

Jesus calls us to live fairly

Jesus calls us to justice.

Jesus calls us to risky living

Jesus calls us to life.

May our Lord be with you in the days and weeks ahead. Amen

CCL: 30925

Be Still - David J. Evans

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From Heaven You Came - Graham Kendrick

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We Are Marching In The Light Of God - South African

Traditional v.1 Anders Nyberg (b. 1955) vv. 2, 3 Andrew Maries (b.1949)

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