

Salford Methodist Circuit



Grief Observed - 19th July 2020
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Transcript

Welcome everyone. It's good to be virtually together with you as we worship God, and listen to what the Spirit might be saying to us at this stage of things, and at time in all our lives.

One question you might be asking is why are we still meeting like this - using a recorded service, when so much of the world is opening up again after a decline in the virulence of the virus? There will be some degree of re-opening before too long - we're not ready to put a date on that yet. But in order to do so we need to analyse the risk and plan the necessary measures that will keep people safe within our buildings. These things take time. We have to think about ways in and out of buildings, keeping records of all who come in for track and trace purposes, ensuring that we have sanitising facilities, and that we can socially distance - which will, of course, limit numbers who can attend. We need to consider procedures for moving around in our buildings, and for keeping our toilets clean and safe. We are not yet allowed to sing, or to share refreshments, and communion has all kinds of restrictions attached to it. We need to think about what services might be like, and really consider their purpose. And there will be no hanging around to chat with friends once a service is over. All of that is a long way from our experience of what church is about, but that is currently what our regulations tell us to do. However, it is a changing picture, and more may be possible in the coming weeks, so I urge you to be patient, as we look to get this right for us all. The virus is still out there, and still changing lives, and we don't want to put anyone at risk.

But we can still meet like this - together though apart, united by our union with the living Christ, and sharing together in worship. And I hope that once we are able to be back in our church buildings, that we may still be able to offer an on-line service for those who for whatever reason cannot get to a church.

There's lots to plan!

Our opening reading is from the book of Isaiah - a reminder of who God is, and that we do nothing on our own strength. God is the rock on which his church was built, and still is! Let's hear that reading now.

Reading: Isaiah 44: 6 - 8

*This is what the Lord says –
Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God.
Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and lay out before me
what has happened since I established my ancient people,
and what is yet to come –
yes, let them foretell what will come.
Do not tremble, do not be afraid.
Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?
You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?*

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No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.'

And now a prayer, let us pray

Loving God, all powerful and ever-present. You are the rock on which your church is built. You are our strength, and our hope, our meaning and our purpose. We exist for you, and we offer you our worship this day.

You are above all powers, and beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Yet you care for us. You love us with a passion. And you have a purpose for us - your people - your church - in this place - and in this moment in time. Help us to discern that purpose and to build the future of our churches here on the strong foundations, and the clear guidance you give to us. Reach out to each of us now, as we worship you.

We join our prayers in the prayer that Jesus taught us:

*Our Father in Heaven, hallowed 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.*

Our first hymn emphasises all that I have said this morning. Thank you to a few people from around the Circuit for helping to lead our singing this morning. Let's sing together 'All My Hope On God Is Founded'

Hymn: All my Hope on God is Founded

*All my hope on God is founded; he doth still my trust renew.
Me through change and chance he guideth, only good and only true.
God unknown, he alone calls my heart to be his own.*

*Human pride and earthly glory, sword and crown betray our trust;
what with care and toil we fashion, tower and temple, fall to dust.
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower.*

*God's great goodness aye endureth, deep his wisdom passing thought;
splendour, light, and life attend him, beauty springeth out of nought.
Evermore from his store new-born worlds rise and adore.*

*Daily doth the almighty giver bounteous gifts on us bestow;
his desire our soul delighteth, pleasure leads us where we go.
Love doth stand at his hand; joy doth wait on his command.*

*Still from earth to God eternal sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising for the gift of Christ his Son.
Christ doth call one and all ye who follow shall not fall.*



So the starting point for our service today is a reminder that our hope is in God, the rock on which we stand - the firm place from which everything begins. I hope that will be our end point too, and the foundation of our whole lives as God's people, God's church, wherever and in what ever circumstances we find ourselves. These recent weeks have seen so many of the firm foundations of our lives taken from us - the expectations of daily living, that nothing prior to this time has ever caused us to doubt.

And for you like me, that will have included the normal comings and goings of every day life, the human interactions that are so much a part of our lives - time with family and friends - time with our church families. It will have included shopping, both for daily existence, and shopping for pleasure. I can hear quite a few of you groaning at that statement, but for some shopping is part of life's fun. If it isn't for you I guess you haven't missed it at all! Perhaps you have missed driving around from place to place - being in a variety of environments - all part of our previous norm that have been lost. And the regular routines of getting up for church on a Sunday morning, and the other things we seem to have always done as part of our church life - all out of the window for months.

But God is our rock - our unchanging solid foundation, though the rest of life may have crumbled beyond recognition.

This morning I want to address a serious issue that is a result of the pandemic - not an easy matter - but a reality in which we exist.

First we'll have our second reading, another from today's lectionary. Words from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 8, thank you

Reading: Romans 8 : 14 - 25

Those who are led by God's Spirit are God's children. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead, the Spirit makes you God's children, and by the Spirit's power we cry out to God, "Father! my Father!" God's Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God's children. Since we are his children, we will possess the blessings he keeps for his people, and we will also possess with Christ what God has kept for him; for if we share Christ's suffering, we will also share his glory. I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us. All of creation waits with eager longing for God to reveal his children. For creation was condemned to lose its purpose, not of its own will, but because God willed it to be so. Yet there was the hope that creation itself would one day be set free from its slavery to decay and would share the glorious freedom of the children of God. For we know that up to the present time all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth. But it is not just creation alone which groans; we who have the Spirit as the first of God's gifts also groan within ourselves as we wait for God to make us his children and set our whole being free. For it was by hope that we were saved; but if we see what we hope for, then it is not really hope. For who of us hopes for something we see? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.



All of creation groaning, and longing for a better future. That sounds somehow familiar. But as adopted children of God we live with the intimacy of a relationship both now and for ever, and a certain hope in glorious freedom to come. We live though all that life throws at us, accepting the present with patience, and believing that one day all suffering in this world will end, and God will reign supreme in every life.

Let's sing again - 'When I Was Lost You Came And Rescued Me, there is a new song in my mouth'

Hymn: When I was Lost

*When I was lost, You came and rescued me;
reached down into the pit and lifted me.
O Lord, such love, I was as far from You as I could be.
You know all the things I've ever done,
but Jesus' blood has cancelled every one.
O Lord, such grace to qualify me as Your own.*

*There is a new song in my mouth, there is a deep cry in my heart,
A hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!
And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now with Christ in God.
The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah!
Your love has lifted me.*

*Now I have come into Your family,
for the Son of God has died for me.
O Lord, such peace, I am as loved by You as I could be.
In the full assurance of Your love,
now with every confidence we come.
O Lord, such joy to know that You delight in us.*

*There is a new song in my mouth, there is a deep cry in my heart,
A hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!
And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now with Christ in God.
The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah!*

*There is a new song in my mouth, there is a deep cry in my heart,
A hymn of praise to Almighty God - hallelujah!
And now I stand firm on this Rock,
my life is hidden now with Christ in God.
The old has gone and the new has come - hallelujah!
Your love has lifted me, Your love has lifted me,
Your love has lifted me, Your love has lifted me.*

Do you remember the film "Shadowlands" that came out in about 1993 - I think it was a play on television before that time. It was the story of the author, CS Lewis, and in particular, of his relationship with Joy Davidman, an American writer with whom he struck up an letter friendship, which to his own amazement eventually became a marriage, after Joy brought her two young sons to live in

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Oxford. All was wonderful for them, being a family together, and Lewis's life was transformed. But Joy developed cancer, and died within four years, leaving CS Lewis to care for her young sons.

CS Lewis wrote a book about the loss of his wife which he entitled "A Grief Observed". He used the notes and diary entries he made through that awful time in his life to piece together the process of grief he went through in coming to terms with his loss. And he pointed out where he found God in it all. At first he experienced anger and bewilderment, and he blamed God for what had happened. Later he moved to a different position towards God - one of gratitude for the amazing experience of true love in his life.

Grief is an experience many of us have passed through in our lives, and all of us will experience at some point. Different people experience it in different ways. Some may pass through grief relatively easily and quickly and move into a new normality. For others it is a place to visit daily, frequently, and is utterly life changing. The loss of someone close to us is always life changing of course, but we all have different ways of dealing with it.

We are a nation experiencing grief on a huge scale at present. Around 45,000 people have lost their lives to Covid-19 in this country at the present time. That's 45,000 families experiencing grief for the loss of a loved one. Statistics cannot begin to bring us close the pain and loss being experienced by so many over such a short period of time. And many others have died too of course. I suspect that as lockdown is gradually lifted we will become increasingly aware of the grief that is all around us. And what is happening in our nation is happening in countries all over the world. We are surrounded by grief and sadness.

A theory developed by psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross suggests that people go through five distinct stages of grief after the loss of a loved one: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and, finally, acceptance.

Denial is about the barriers of protection we automatically put up. This cannot be happening to me. This cannot be real.

Anger often quickly follows - a desire to blame someone or something for what we are experiencing. We might even blame the person who has died for leaving us in this way.

Anger is followed by bargaining as we think in terms of "if only"
If only we had sought medical attention sooner...
If only we got a second opinion from another doctor...
If only we had tried to be a better person toward them...
Sometimes this stage involves guilt that we didn't act differently.

The fourth stage, sadness or depression can go on for a long time, as we fail to find the energy to move forward, and allow the negatives of our situation to overwhelm us. It's very natural, but it's also very hard.

Finally there is acceptance, a state with a degree of calmness. There is the realisation of a new reality, and a willingness to embrace all that has been and that is, and that will be.

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These stages vary in length and intensity for each individual in a place of grief, but they are an observed pattern of what happens time and again. And we are surrounded by those who going through all of these phases. And all we can do is walk alongside in understanding and compassion.

But I think that this time of pandemic has caused many of us - maybe all of us - to experience a similar pattern in terms of the virus itself.

There's was a lot of denial at first - the virus won't affect us! It's happening a long way from here.

Then came lock down. That was talked about for a while before it happened and I heard people say things like, 'they're not going to make me stay at home and stop doing what I do.' There was a huge anger aimed at anyone who might try to make changes to our life style and our freedom. But lockdown happened.

Then came the bargaining: OK - if I socially distance for two weeks that will put everything right won't it? So we locked down and hid ourselves away. And the virus spread and its affects covered our nation. Then we reached the stage of depression and sadness - will this ever end? Many coped well; for others it was considerably more of a struggle.

It's been months now. Mid-March seems a long time ago. And we've reached a kind of acceptance: I can wash my hands. I can keep a safe distance. I can learn how to work virtually. I am still alive. Life goes on.

We have grieved the life we had not so very long ago. But we have accepted a different normal. And we wonder how long this will be the normal. Will we ever get back to where we were. What will our country look like? What will our world look like? And what will our churches look like? I think the pandemic has also taken us through these stages of grief in terms of our church buildings and more importantly our church families. Where are we in this process? That's hard to say. The path ahead is still very far from clear.

Back in the early part of March we lived in denial and carried on as normal, whilst looking on at other parts of our world entering lockdown, and losing people on every side. Perhaps we felt a degree of anger - this won't stop us being church - they won't stop us doing what we want to do - we'll keep going. Until we knew we couldn't. Then there was a sense of we'll put up with this for a few weeks - but we'll be back - in May ... in June .. in July .. in August .. in September - maybe next year!

Perhaps in terms of our churches the recognition of how this time has changed us - how very difficult it will be to get back to any kind of the normal we used to have has led us to sadness, to depression - to an overwhelming sense of loss or of potential long-term loss that we are not yet ready to face.

But it is very real, as is the loss of so much in our world, and in our nation. So much loss in so many different ways, in so many lives. Loss is all around us, and the sadness will go on for many for a long time to come. However, we are still church! Because we are God's people! That has not changed at all. But the present and future for your own church building and family may still be a cause for concern, and may have taken you to that place of sadness.

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Or maybe you are ready to move into the phrase of acceptance. Things have changed. None of us will ever be the same. And nor will the world we know. But there is a new reality - a new normality. And we are ready to embrace it - to walk with it - to see where it is leading us.

The great thing for us as Christians is that we have faith - a belief in things that are stable, even while life's experiences hurl us into strange times and an alternative reality. When we talk about seeing where "it" is leading us, our "it" is in fact God - the power, the strength, the vision, the patience, the truth and the love of Almighty God - the One we worship.

We are not stepping out onto fragile ice, wondering if it will hold us up.
We are not teetering on the edge of a precipice with nothing to hold on to.
We are not sinking beneath the waves as the storm blows all around us.

Did you watch the series of programmes with Garth Malone, creating songs with people caught up in the challenges of the pandemic. I loved the words of one of those songs, with lyrics by 16 year old Rae Kwan which said: "This is just another storm. We will rebuild together."

We will rebuild together as God's church. Not trying to put back every stone just as it was it. We can't because we are charged. But we will rebuild for the future. Not necessarily the future as we imagined it would be. But a future which acknowledges what has changed us, and uses new knowledge and experience to build a new tomorrow that will last. A strong purposeful church that finds its strength in God and moves forward through his changed world, with vision and hope and a sense of purpose greater than we had before.

Grief is hard - very hard. And grief is all around us. The time for grieving for the loss of things during the time of pandemic may be passing. The time for grieving for the church as it was may still be very real. But together we can move into the new reality, with God all around us and within us, by the power of His ever present and ever creative Spirit. Together we can build a new and hopeful tomorrow. Are you ready for that? Are you willing to be part of it? Do you have the courage to step onto the ice with the assurance that it can and will hold your weight, and will never cause you to slip. Can you manage the edge of the precipice, seeing the hand of Christ holding firmly to you, knowing that you do not cling on in your own strength but are held by his. And do you have the courage to step out of the boat, and walk upon the moving stormy waters, as though they are firm ground, knowing that the rock on which we are built is holding us up, and always will?

Will you trust in the One who entrusts the tomorrow of his church and his kingdom to you?

And will you walk into the new reality with confidence, empowered by the real love that is there for you, inviting you to reflect that love in this world.

And are we yet alive? We certainly are! Let's look forward with real hope and assurance. And confidence, built on the One who is our rock. Amen

I'd like to invite Jennie Smith now to lead us in prayer.

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Let us pray

Loving Lord, we know that grief has always been a painful part of life.

We know that grief can't be avoided and we know that it's a process that can never be rushed.

We grieve for the loss of countless things. The list is long.

This morning we pray for those who throughout the world are grieving for the loss of their homes. They have become homeless through natural disasters, through wars, or changes in their personal circumstances. Thousands live as refugees. Hundreds live rough on our streets.

We pray especially today for those who have been given hotel accommodation during these recent weeks but now they are having to return to their former tough existence on the streets.

We pray today for everyone who is grieving for the loss of their previous lifestyle. Grieving for all the things they had taken for granted; weekends away and holidays. Concerts, theatre trips, football matches and I guess most of all, for the precious time spent with much loved family and friends.

We pray for those who are grieving for their loss of freedom and independence to come and to go whenever and wherever and with whoever they choose.

We pray for everyone who is unemployed, for all those who are grieving for the loss of jobs,

Grieving for the loss of their financial security and for their ability to provide for their families. Grieving for their loss of self esteem and dignity when now relying on charity to survive.

We pray especially at this unprecedented time for all those families who are bereaved and trying to adjust to a new sort of life without loved ones, trying to come to terms with so much tragic loss throughout the world.

Trying to make some sort of sense of it all.

Loving Lord, remind all those who are bereaved of CS Lewis' poignant words. 'that the pain they suffer is the happiness they had before.'

Loving Lord, hold on to all who walk through the valley of tears. Reach out to them and let them know that you are with them, sharing their pain and moved by their sorrow. Give them the assurance that those who mourn will be comforted and those who weep will, in time laugh again.

We pray too for those who are grieving the loss of a pet, help us to support them in their sorrow Lord and to understand how therapeutic pets can be to ease anxiety and loneliness.

We pray for those who grieve for their loss of all hope in their circumstances, in their dreams and in life itself.

Loving Lord, reach out to all whose belief in the future has been lost. Give them hope again. Grant new dreams where old ones have died and rekindle purposes where confidences have been lost.

Loving God. We pray for those who grieve because they have lost their faith in you.

Open their ears again to the message of Christ, their spirits to the reality of your presence and their lives to the joy of knowing you. Assure them of your continuing purpose. Speak to each of them and grant them your peace.

For a few moments let's just reflect on our own griefs and losses.

Loving Lord it's comforting to know that you too are well acquainted with grief.

We are certain that you know and love all those who grieve today. You feel their anguish and their sense of loss. Give them comfort. Make them aware of your love and give them the peace that only you can give – and so may their burdens be lifted and their souls refreshed. Amen



Our final hymn, to a very familiar tune, reminds us that the One who is real and alive, and with us and ready to inspire us with new hope and new purpose is the living God, the One we worship, and have worshipped with dedication and loyalty for so long. Our response to the love we have received is to love in return, too give that love to others in our lives and in our actions. That is the call we are invited to accept - the acceptance and the new reality we are called to embrace.

Before we sing it can I remind you to read the leaflet that has been circulated, and of the invitation to join the Zoom conversations on the way forward on Monday or Wednesday this week. Or if you don't feel able to do that, to pick up your phone and just talk to someone about what is suggested. The future is both daunting and exciting. But it's a future in which all can share. Let's go there together and with optimism, for our God is leading us there, one step at a time.

Let love be real in giving and receiving. Let's sing that hymn together.

Hymn: Let Love Be Real

*Let love be real, in giving and receiving,
without the need to manage and to own;
a haven free from posing and pretending,
where every weakness may be safely known.
Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,
give me your love wherever we may go.
As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.*

*Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
that strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
that helps us face the risk of truly living,
and makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength when all my words are weakness;
give me your love in spite of all you know.
As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.*

*Let love be real, with no manipulation,
no secret wish to harness or control;
let us accept each other's incompleteness,
and share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope through dreams and disappointments;
give me your trust when all my failings show.
As God loves us, so let us love each other:
with no demands, just open hands and space to grow.*

Wherever you are leading us, Loving God, may we see your footsteps clearly and follow with confidence.

May we see that you offer a hand for support, but also that you are holding us with love and support and encouragement.

Together, may we find your plan for your circuit, and these your churches.

And together may we worship and serve you with our trust, our hope and our love.

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May your blessing, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us, now in this time, and in the days ahead, and for ever.
Amen.

See you all soon.