

Salford Methodist Circuit



God Persists - 20th September 2020

Ruth Dawson

Welcome to worship this September day. Our call to worship:

The Lord our God is great and to be highly praised

We come to worship

The Lord our God is great beyond our understanding

We come to worship

The Lord our God is loving and full of mercy

We come to worship

Amen

Our first hymn we shall hear or sing, is Singing the Faith number 489 – All I once Held Dear, build my life upon....

Hymn: All I Once Held Dear

*All I once held dear,
built my life upon,
all this world reveres,
and wars to own,
all I once thought gain
I have counted loss;
spent and worthless now,
compared to this.*

*Knowing you, Jesus,
knowing you,
there is no greater thing.
You're my all, you're the best,
you're my joy, my righteousness,
and I love you, Lord.*

*Now my heart's desire
is to know you more,
to be found in you
and known as yours.
To possess by faith
what I could not earn,
all-surpassing gift
of righteousness.
Knowing you, Jesus...*

*Oh, to know the power
of your risen life,
and to know you in*

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your sufferings.

To become like you

in your death, my Lord,

so with you to live

and never die.

Knowing you, Jesus...

Our prayers today come from across the Methodist Church. The first is from Dr Joyce Popoola, the second is from one of our Methodist youth representatives Michael Pryke, followed by Carolyn Lawrence, our Vice-President of Methodist Conference and finished by Helen Cameron Chair of Northampton Methodist District. Let us pray

Dear Lord God, I feel, like many, that this is not an easy time. Still, I do feel the love that you shower upon me in such abundance. Thank you for all your protection and always being by my side even when I'm at the lowest of lows, having that ability of sensing your all-encompassing presence. I wake up each morning and head out to work not knowing what I will encounter. I see fear written on the faces of patients and sometimes hear trembles in their voices. I see the pain and feel the pain the relatives feel; the anguish of not being able to visit their loved ones and even sometimes when it is known that they may not have much time to live. But Lord I know that you are in the middle of all this, that you are unwavering, that you see all things. Lord, help us to support one another in a Godly kind of way, be we in a first, a second or a whatever surge of ailment. Help us to trust that you will be the God that saves and that heals, the God that gives hope and gives joy, the true God who is faithful, even when we feel troubled. Amen.

Lord, though we may be apart, may we know you more nearly and dearly. May your love and peace guide us always. May we be comforted by your presence during these times. Gracious God, we may be worried and concerned for ourselves and so many others at the moment. May we all be guided by you, may we all know your peace and harmony. And Lord, as your church on earth finds new ways to be, may we all remember that we do this in your name, for as we know the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever and ever. Amen.

We pray for young people preparing to go to university in these difficult days. We pray that they will quickly be able to settle into their new surroundings and for the mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of students away from the familiarity of home. Thank you Jesus for your promise that you will be with us always. We pray for university chaplains, MethSocs and Christian Unions seeking to offer pastoral care and support to students, and we remember parents who are grieving as they face the

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empty nest and missing their child. May they all know your peace, presence and strength each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

You said once not a sparrow falls without you knowing. I know that you know and love me. But not just me. You love all your children, you care about what is happening to each of us. So the prisoner in an overcrowded prison with Covid is known to you. And the care home assistant who moves in to care for her patients with dementia is known to you. And those who die alone are known to you. Keep us in your love and your grace, now and always. Amen.

Reading: Jonah 3 : 10 - 4 : 11

When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened. This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen." The Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?"

Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed.

Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?"

"Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

Reading: Philippians 1 : 21 - 30

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For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith. And when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to take pride in Christ Jesus because of what he is doing through me.

Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News. Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.

Hymn: Best Of All Is God is With Us

*Best of all is God is with us,
God will hold and never fail.
Keep that truth when storms are
God remains though faith is frail.*

*Best of all is God is with us,
life goes on and needs are met,
God is strongest in our weakness.
Love renews, will not forget.*

*Best of all is God is with us,
hearts are challenged, strangely warmed,
faith is deepened, courage strengthened,
grace received and hope reformed.*

*Best of all is God is with us,
in our joy and through our pain,
till that final acclamation:
'life is Christ, and death is gain.'*

*Best of all is God is with us
as we scale eternal heights,
love grows stronger, undiminished;*

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earth grows dim by heaven's lights.

Who would have thought on the turn of the year, what a year 2020 would turn out to be. For those IT minded there has been a meme doing the rounds, that if you divide the year 2020 by 5 you get the error code 404.

Many had plans for the year that we have not been able to conclude, prom nights, weddings, graduations, A levels, GCSEs, new jobs, sporting events – with even the Olympics postponed – festivals, the list could go on and on.

Some of us have learnt many new skills, IT skills for one – who would ever have dreamed that I would lead swimming AGM on Zoom! Mind you. it was our highest ever attendance and we might continue even then we can actually meet!

In our readings we have heard of the frustration of Jonah. The ancient city of Nineveh was in the modern-day Iraq, on the outskirts of Mosul. Jonah was not happy in his role as prophet and shows his anger at God. He doesn't believe the gentile Ninevites are worth saving, and anyway he was pretty sure that God would forgive these people whatever, so his role was pretty much a waste of time, and he would be made a fool of.

Even so, God continues to interact with Jonah. The plant grew, and Jonah became attached to it. When the plant died, Jonah became sad and angry with God again. God still persisted with Jonah and remonstrates with him for being more upset over the fate of a plant than the 120,000 inhabitants of Nineveh.

In our second reading Paul is writing from prison. It is not sure whether was written from Caesarea in the late AD 50s or Rome in the early 60s. It is understood to be the composite of two letters, the beginning of the reading being the end of one letter into the beginning of another.

In this reading we pick up Paul's greeting to the 'saints' in Philippi and an assurance of his prayers for them. Paul goes on to explain his struggles to them, comparing theirs with his. Paul wants to appear encouraging and commends them for their approach to life in the faith, even when he is not sure himself if he should stick at it or not.

Paul knows what these struggles are like and how intimidating the opposition can be. He needs the support of the Philippians just as much as they need him. Both these readings make a good contrast.

Jonah was afraid to look foolish, while Paul presses on with complete fearlessness.

Jonah is so miserable he wishes he could die; Paul is so happy in Christ he wishes he could die in order to be with Christ.

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Jonah cared nothing for the people of Nineveh; Paul cares so much for the people of Philippi that he would prefer to put off his own final glory if only he could stand by them.

There are also similarities, for in both God seeks to address those who have become enemies with a sign. In Jonah it was Jonah himself, preaching in the sackcloth. In the Philippians it was the faithful church, confounding its enemies. Paul sees the church's enemies as lost, but also believes God is not abandoning them, but addressing them through the unity of the church.

Much in the way 2020 hasn't really fulfilled its expectation of what was to come, there are personal paths that are difficult for us to choose, perhaps we don't even choose, but equally difficult to follow.

In our house this week, the final Cherub has found (well driven) his way to University. A house that for the past twenty-two years has been full of noise, some good stuff – some laughter, some giggles, some chatter, some not so good – the screaming of sibling rivalry way out of hand, is now eerily quiet, three empty bedrooms whilst those I love more than life itself, make their own way in the world. I have often joked that as a parent I have only two roles in life – one, to embarrass the life out of all cherubs of mine, and two, to produce independent adults who can make their own way in the world. What I didn't realise was that when that time came, I wouldn't quite know what to do with my time.

This change in path, though, is not just mine, for Thomas there are many changes, new friends, new city (Northumbria for the inquisitive), new learning, new skills – cleaning for one!

And then there is a whole new dynamic in our little family, communication being spelled out across What's App, shopping for two, and yes perhaps I need to get to like my husband all over again!

As I reevaluate the paths I am on, my path as mother has changed, but not broken. I'm assured my cherubs will always need me, but just in different ways. Just as God persisted with his interaction with Jonah, and as Paul encouraged the Philippians, we too are encouraged, and persisted with.

God uses us for the talents and skills we have, and even in this error year of 2020 God is there in the middle of whatever this is.

God is here in our lives, he nudges in the right direction, and even when the paths turn and meander in a different route, God shines his light so we can see the way, and if we can but listen, He whispers encouragement to keep on going.

Amen.

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Our final hymn number 513 in Singing the Faith, which reminds us all to give up to God those things which discourage us whilst helping us to find our worth to live in Christ's name –

Hymn : Take This Moment, Sign And Space

*Take this moment, sign, and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.*

*Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.*

*Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.*

*Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.*

*Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me*

Take my talents, Take my skills, Take what's yet to be, Let my life be yours, and yet Let it still be me....

Our final blessings:

Lord, give us a way to go, a path to follow, a purpose to fulfil and meaning to our deeds.

Amen

All I Once Held Dear - Graham Kendrick

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Best Of All Is God Is With Us - Andrew Pratt

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Take This Moment, Sign And Space - John Bell & Graham Maule

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