**Morning Praise @ Home 23rd July 2023**

**Opening prayer**

Blessed are you, God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing; enable us by your power to be true to our calling and live holy and blameless lives before you all our days, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. **Amen**

**Confession** Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

**Lord God, we have sinned against you; we have done evil in your sight. We are sorry and**

**repent.** **Have mercy on us according to your love. Wash away our wrongdoing and cleanse us**

**from our sin.** **Renew a right spirit within us** **and restore us to the joy of your salvation,** **through**

**Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen** cf Psalm 51

**Absolution** May the Father of all mercies cleanse us from our sins, and restore us in his image

to the praise and glory of his name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### Bible Readings Jeremiah 17: 7 – 8 Mark 8: 34 – 38

**Reflection from Sue *Taking up your cross***

We’ve just had some recent local elections and I was reminded of the theme music to Tony Blair’s electioneering in the late 90s. The idea that *Things can only get better* was very appealing to a country wearied by political sleaze and economic uncertainty – 25 years on, we’re here again! We long for things to look up, to escape from whatever weighs us down.

Jesus first followers were no different. Under Roman oppression they longed for their promised Messiah to liberate them; economically insignificant, they dreamt of the glory and status that being on the winning side would confer on them. And at this point in Mark 8, Jesus has just miraculously fed 4000 people *and* healed a man born blind, resulting in Peter’s recognition that Jesus is indeed the promised Saviour, the glorious liberator. Surely, *Things* could *only get better.*

And then, KAPOW – their leader deals a body blow: don’t think of glory, don’t think of status and power; forget your visions of triumph – I am going to be rejected, humiliated, executed by the state.

‘NO WAY’ protests Peter! But yes, Jesus spells out, this is how the eventual glory of the Son of Man will be achieved – not through the easy popularity Satan enticed him with in the desert, but travelling an uncomfortable road towards pain, which becomes suffering, then sacrificial death. Only having faced all that, will He appear in glory.

‘And,’ Jesus shockingly adds to everyone listening, ‘that’s not just my road, but is the one all my followers need to be prepared to follow.’

Society today is obsessed with personal well-being. But instead of looking to a Messiah for remedy, it focuses on health regimes and exercise plans, to pay rises and medication if we’re unhappy. We feel we have a *right* to be comfortable, whilst health and safety concerns keep us cosseting our young from any risk.

Since the long-term future looks un-nerving, we limit our horizons to the immediate months and years, aided by easy credit and addictive pleasures. ‘If something *doesn’t* make us feel good, then avoid it,’ says the media. ‘Enjoy whatever you like and don’t let anyone shame you into behaving differently.’

Yet Jesus’ path *invites* being shamed.

Enveloped by digitally enhanced media, our culture is starting to make us wonder if anything we see or hear via technology can be trusted. This week’s news has featured concern at the uses of Artificial Intelligence, whilst the perceived ‘deep fakery’ of the internet allows conspiracy theories to flourish.

By contrast, Jesus’ message - neither comfortable nor initially appealing – is bracingly truthful. Real life *is* often tough, and, says Jesus, ‘following me will definitely be challenging’. We are not talking about him inviting ourselves and our friends on a pleasant afternoon walk, but to a dangerous and risky hike.

Now, understandably we want our church to be friendly and welcoming, *but* any fellowship which sets the bar very low will not ultimately flourish, just as it’s no good suggesting that flipflops are fine to climb Moel Famau. God’s Kingdom isn’t worked out through a few ‘minor adjustments’ to our ordinary lives, showing up when it suits us, with pleasantness maintained at all times. Jesus words here, about the cost of following, have to be part of our manifesto.

Driving towards Chester recently, I saw a vehicle with bikes strapped on the back, a roof box fixed aloft and a small trailer behind. Heaven help them if they tried to navigate Delamere multi-story car park! But Jesus isn’t prepared to be a ‘bolt-on’ fixture.

Instead he is calling to us all: ‘Follow my path, focus on the eternal horizon and meanwhile be prepared to be out of your comfort zone. Face the likelihood that you may be unpopular in many quarters, that you’ll need to avoid the seduction of a glamorous lifestyle, that what happens in life won’t be up to you. I will be in the driving seat and the journey will involve challenge and discomfort.’

This is the start of a new message in Mark’s Gospel, and Jesus doesn’t dress it up with a funny anecdote or engaging story, but baldly warns those around him: ‘Remember,’ he says, ‘that our physical, mortal existence is not all there is.’

Since John took up this post, I’ve often overheard him on the phone organising funerals. It brings home to me the fact that no one spends that long on this earth, compared to our eternal existence thereafter. Now this is not a message society likes. This week I saw a TV ad about *funeral* care that never mentioned the words ‘death’ or ‘dying’! Even Christians don’t always like to think like this. When was the last time any of us had a conversation that mentioned eternity and judgement?

Yet a worldly investment in securing comfort for ourselves now will *not* provide comfort for us beyond the grave. *That* will depend on whether we have put Jesus first each day. If we’ve downplayed his significance, or ignored his promptings, he warns us in v.38 that he won’t be committed to us either.

And there *will* be a great reversal, when the rejected one is enthroned; when the scorned one is honoured by all peoples; when the powerless cross carrier dispenses judgement on all. This week a report into a historic police investigation accepts that they *did* get it wrong, for which the Commissioner has, finally, apologised. The victim’s family, who never stopped seeking justice, are at last vindicated.

Justice matters, and is promised for Christ’s faithful followers: ‘God will pay back trouble to those who have troubled us, and give relief to those who are troubled for his sake’ explains Paul in 2 Thessalonians Ch 1. The cost will be vindicated.

As this sermon series is helping us to understand, Jesus isn’t looking for volunteers who can fit Him in to their existing schedule, but for disciples who make Him the centre. Christianity makes demands of us, the biggest being that we must stop prioritising our personal concerns before those of Christ, what Jesus refers to as ‘denying oneself’. Next Saturday we will celebrate a wedding. Are we prepared to commit ourselves to Jesus ‘forsaking all others’, ‘for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health’?

Christ calls us to be obedient, to be holy, to be sacrificial and to be missional. It is nothing he hasn’t already done himself, walking the path ahead of us. He also assures us that he will be alongside us as we stumble onwards.

In the UK we are unlikely to be persecuted for our faith, unlike 1000s of Christians today in Africa, India and Asia. So what might our ‘cross’ look like? It is a series of choices:

* To start each day by consciously deciding to commit it to God
* To pray about each situation as we enter it, asking Jesus to give us His perspective
* To be ready to respond, sharing our time, our talents and our resources, willing to follow God’s sat-nav direction
* To take action against injustice, standing up for the vulnerable
* Relationally, to decide to forgive rather than hold grievances, to apologise rather than be proud, to make restitution if necessary
* Since we are never called to walk Christ’s path alone, choosing to prioritise gathering together, to worship, share, pray with and help one another.

If we call ourselves a **Christ**ian, then each day is not about us but about Christ. And it is in following Christ that we will discover life in all its fullness, both now and for eternity. **Amen**

**Affirmation of faith**

Do you believe and trust in God the Father, source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again?

**We believe and trust in him.**

Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God and makes Christ known in the world?

**We believe and trust in him. This is the faith of the Church.**

**This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

**Prayers of intercession**

Everlasting God, we bring our prayers to you, asking that your blessing of love and peace may be known to all people everywhere.

We pray for your Church, especially for the people you have made prophets and teachers in our generation. We pray that they will be strengthened and protected by the Holy Spirit and that through them your Church will reveal the good news of salvation and draw all people together under your rule of justice and mercy.

We give thanks for John as he works tirelessly to spread the Gospel here in Burton, Puddington and Shotwick. We pray for him and the PCCs of both parishes as they begin the journey to a new vision for our health and church growth.

Lord God we pray for all who work for peace and unity, and for all world leaders that they will continue to seek for an end to the suffering caused by war and violence, injustice and inequality, disease, prejudice, poverty and hopelessness and bring healing to the world.

We continue to pray for those who are refugees and seek safety in another country, despite the dangers of the journey.

We pray for the leaders in Europe especially that agreement can be reached on how to cope with so many in a way that is fair and achievable, and that does not lead refugees and migrants into danger and exploitation.

We give thanks for our young people as they come to the end of the school year. Be especially with those leaving Bishop Wilson School as they move on to secondary education.

We remember the older and retired people here in our church and around us in our lives. Send your Holy Spirit to inspire them to use and share their life experiences with wisdom, humility and gladness.

We raise before you all those who seek healing of body, mind or spirit asking that they will sense the touch of your loving hands and feel your peace and presence alongside them, each and every step of their journey towards healing and wholeness.

Gracious God we pray for the work and service of all care homes and day centres for elderly and sick people, and for those carers who look after family and friends in their own home. Thank you for the many charity organisations who raise money and provide supportive services to help. We pray for all finding their life painful, lonely or uncertain, especially those who are ill or vulnerable. Help them to sense your comfort in times of need and bless their families and carers.

Merciful Father, **accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

**The Lord’s Prayer** As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

***Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name, Thy kingdom come,******Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen***

**Closing prayer**

God give you grace to become the people He has called you to be, that you may live and work to his praise and glory, and the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us and remain with us always. **Amen**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. **In the name of Christ. Amen**