

Worship 9th May
Aberlour Parish Church
Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Prayer of approach, confession and Lord's Prayer

God our God,
Throughout time and history,
from Your eternal glory
You have called through the clamour of a creation too often too busy for you
You have called individuals
Prophets and Kings,
and women of wisdom
You have called communities,
families, and towns, and nations,
and today your call is to everyone, the world over
that they might come to you, and might know your love.

And so we have come.
Come this Sunday morning,
come as a community of your people,
gathered as your body, Christ's church.

And each of us have come from different contexts,
from different lives,
with different joys and troubles,
with differing aches and strains,
Yet we all come – in need of your healing love.
So heal us Lord
Heal us from the wounds we carry daily
from the weights of daily living – the endless to-do lists,
and the stresses of the week.
Heal us from our worries and anxieties.
let us find in you a time to be still, to breathe afresh,
and to find peace.

“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will give you rest”

Heal us from the wounds of our strained relationships;
release us from words said that cloy to minds, spinning around on repeat, pulling us down,
ease our pent-up frustration, our hurt and our anger
it is weight we need carry no longer|
and is a risk only to ourselves, and those to whom it might spill out, misdirected
break bonds of hate and apathy, replace them with relationships defined by love.
“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will you rest”
Heal us from the wounds of our sin,
When we ought to have lived as those worthy to be called your children,
we confess we have not.
In the process, we have hurt others, or neglected to love fully,
and we have hurt ourselves, and failed to see ourselves with the love you show us.

Heal us, that we might grow in your love,
that we might be made in nearer likeness to Christ,
that we might be claimed as your redeemed children.

“Come to me all who are heavy laden, I will you rest”

So we pray, asking your Spirit will be with us as we worship together,
that our days might be blessed, and we know more deeply Christ who taught us all to pray together saying:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name,
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is heaven,
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever.
Amen.

Hymn CH4 97

PSALM 139

- 1 O God, you search me and you know me.
All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.
When I walk or lie down you are before me :
ever the maker and keeper of my days.
- 2 You know my resting and my rising.
You discern my purpose from afar,
and with love everlasting you besiege me :
in every moment of life or death, you are.
- 3 Before a word is on my tongue, Lord,
you have known its meaning through and through.
You are with me beyond my understanding :
God of my present, my past and future, too.
- 4 Although your Spirit is upon me,
still I search for shelter from your light.
There is nowhere on earth I can escape you :
even the darkness is radiant in your sight.
- 5 For you created me and shaped me,
gave me life within my mother’s womb.
For the wonder of who I am, I praise you :
safe in your hands, all creation is made new.

from Psalm 139

Bernadette Farrell (*b.* 1957)

Reading – Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21

¹³ You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it. ¹⁴ I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors. ¹⁵ But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, ¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterwards I returned to Damascus.

....

¹¹ But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹² for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴

But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?’

¹⁵ We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶ yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷ But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹ For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰ and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Reflection

This week we jump briefly into Paul’s letters, leaving Acts behind us.

We find ourselves with the letter to the Galatians, the young church which Paul visited on his missionary travels and clearly kept in touch with. Galatia was a community in what we today would call the central highlands of Turkey. Unlike many of the early churches it was not a coastal community – yet was still a community that knew many of the comings and goings of the empire, a busy place, and at a cross section of multiple cultural identities.

And Paul writes to them concerned about something, a teaching; or someone, a teacher, that is leading the Galatians astray.

One of the issues with Paul’s letters is, of course that we only have the one side of a conversation, and a conversation not addressed to us, but that we’re eavesdropping in on. So it can be quite hard to piece together some of the issues or events Paul is talking about – sometimes, for instance, his version of events differs from versions of events recorded elsewhere.

This reading might be one of those times: it’s not so much that it directly contradicts a version of similar events we heard told last week in Acts, as that it feels very much like different people telling the story different ways – in order to highlight the contribution of some people over others, with different emphases about who is right about what.

In our Acts reading last week, Paul was presented very much as the junior figure to Peter and the Apostles. Going to them for advice and to sort out a problem about how the gentile believers should behave in regards to the Jewish Law.

This week, Paul tells the story such that he is the one who was correct all along: with even the added flourish of telling off and castigating Peter in front of all the believers. IT’s scenes like this that make me think I probably wouldn’t have liked Paul very much: sometimes, don’t you think, a quiet word is better placed than a public confrontation?

Now the temptation is to get caught up on the argument itself: the who said what? When? and who was right? and should they really have done that? It would be really tempting to set this up as a Peter vs Paul punch up over authority – who was *really* the most important in the early church?

Of course, Jesus disciples in the gospels bickered more than once about ‘who is the greatest’ and each time Jesus cut them all right down to size – it’s not a competition, and even if it were, the one who wants to be first should become last, serving and loving their neighbours. So we’d be falling into the same trap if we made this about Peter vs Paul.

Instead – what about the source of the conflict.

Paul accuses Peter – whether rightly or wrongly, I don’t think it matters, because the point and the learning for us will be the same either way – Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy, that when there isn’t anybody who’ll object around to see it, he’ll happily eat alongside the gentiles, in contravention of the Jewish laws. That, Paul seems very certain of, is the correct way to be. (though in others of his letters, earlier ones, he is less bullishly certain in his thinking on the issue). The problem Paul has with Peter is that he thinks Peter shies away from eating with the Gentiles when there are Jews around who might object – the group we heard about last week, that Paul calls here, the ‘circumcision faction’.

As I say, it doesn’t really matter whether this is really what Peter was doing or not – the lessons are the same. And I think there are 2 main lessons for us today in Paul’s words:

The first lesson from Paul is plain and clear: and is one of *integrity*, that our actions should dovetail with our words and beliefs *at all times* not just when it suits us or when it is easy. We all know the difficulties in this; and we all know the struggle. Especially when as Christians, our words and beliefs demand a lot: if we are to talk of living lives that show the light and love of God in the world, we are inevitably going to encounter difficulties in action matching belief. Which is why we can’t and don’t act on our own – but in the arena of God’s deep and wide forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We are forgiven folk, and whatever our failings in love, we are called onwards to learn, and to love again.

The second lesson is one of unity – and not simply human unity, but how human behaviour has to reflect the heavenly unity we *all* share in God’s grace. What appears to offend Paul so thoroughly about the behaviour he alleges of Peter, is that by *sometimes* eating with the Gentiles, the impression is given of unity – but that whenever there is space or an option for the Jewish believers to retreat, to keep separate, the truth of the belief is exposed – that really there is still a distinction between Jewish believer and Gentile believer.

And it’s not so much that there is a distinction between people that Paul is worried about, He is not trying to pretend everyone is the same – clearly people are different and diverse. The distinction Paul refuses to acknowledge is one that goes deeper, and for him amounts to blasphemy: The distinction he thinks happens if the believers separate – even slightly- along Jewish and Gentiles lines, is one that goes to the heart of God’s grace. For Paul God’s grace, shown in Jesus Christ, either *is* completely enough for the justification of the believer; or it is not at all – in words that finished our reading: Christ would have died for nothing. Either Christ has saved us and we are made free from sin by the grace of God; or we are still in need of the law, and condemned by sin in light of the Law. Paul doesn’t have an in-between when it comes to God’s grace or the saving work of Jesus.

Paul’s Jesus doesn’t do half-measures, Paul’s God doesn’t dip a toe in the water before loving us: Fully, completely, utterly, and infinitely we are loved by God, saved in Christ, and held in grace by God’s spirit.

We can see, maybe now, why this is a big deal for Paul.

There is no distinction in God’s love for you and me, nor anybody else. The immensity and fullness of God’s love and grace is Good News, and it is Good News for us all, for all time.

Amen.

Hymn CH4 528

- 1 Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there is hatred let me bring your love ;
where there is injury, your pardon, Lord ;

and where there's doubt, true faith in you.

*Oh, Master, grant that I may never seek
so much to be consoled as to console ;
to be understood as to understand ;
to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*

- 2 Make me a channel of your peace.
Where there's despair in life let me bring hope ;
where there is darkness, only light ;
and where there's sadness, ever joy.
- 3 Make me a channel of your peace.
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
in giving of ourselves that we receive ;
and in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Sebastian Temple (1928–1997)
from the *Prayer of St Francis*

Prayers for others and ourselves

Glorious God, we turn our attention to the needs of our world,
and our place in helping build your kingdom, by your grace.

Gracious God we ask Your blessing on those who struggle to find their identity, their true purpose and a place of belonging.

Bless all victims of abuse who have been conditioned to feel worthless, weak and hopeless.

Grant to those who rescue and who counsel them the ability to inspire dignity, hope and wholeness.

Bless those whose struggles with addiction have resulted in a change of personality.

Grant to those who care for them the ability to provide reassurance and recovery.

Bless all whose struggles with gender identity make them feel alone, misunderstood and misrepresented.

Grant wisdom and sensitivity to those who offer dignity, empathy and support.

Bless all who through loss of work, income, health or family life find themselves rootless, homeless or friendless. Guide them to people who will listen, care, respect, befriend and support.

Bless all who through the brutality of war, famine or poverty find themselves torn from family, home or the country of their birth. There are many. Each is known and loved by You.

Inspire us all to pray, to campaign, to give and to work for a more just and kind world.

Bless Your persecuted children throughout the world who, because of their allegiance to Christ and His Church, are despised, deprived of basic human rights and discriminated against.

We give thanks for their bravery in the face of brutality; for their courage as they face cruel cowardice. We praise You for their costly witness. Grant them the assurance and peace that the Psalmist celebrates in today's Psalm. Help us who live in comfort never to be deaf to their cries. On this day when we have considered the example left by faithful people, obedient to Your call to serve, we pray for all who sense a call to serve Your Church.

Guide them as they seek to discern Your purpose for their lives. Grant kindness, wisdom and sensitivity to all who are charged by the Church to test that call. We pray earnestly that You, the Lord of the harvest, will send out labourers into that harvest.

Hear us now in a time of silence as we name in the quietness of hearts people known and loved by us who are facing times of bereavement, bewilderment or any kind of brokenness...

SILENCE

Lord in Your mercy, hear our prayer, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Hymn CH4 519

- 1 Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesus, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art ;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.
- 2 Come, almighty to deliver ;
let us all thy life receive ;
suddenly return, and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.
- 3 Finish then thy new creation :
pure and spotless let us be ;
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee,
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

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Sending and blessing

Let us go from here
to be a friend to the stranger in our midst.
May we show and share the love of God.
May we invite others to experience
the joy and fellowship of Christ.
And as we do,
may we be encouraged and encapsulated
by the Holy Spirit.
So with the blessing of God in Trinity
may we all go in peace