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Service for the 11th Sunday after Trinity, 15th August 2021

A warm welcome to all who share in worship with us today.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Let us give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! Because of his great mercy he gave us new life by raising Jesus Christ from death.

This fills us with a living hope, and so we look forward to possessing the rich blessings that God keeps for his people. (I Peter 1: 3-4)

HYMN: When morning gilds the skies

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.

1 When morning gilds the skies,
my heart awaking cries:
May Jesus Christ be praised.
Alike at work and prayer
to him I would repair:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

2 When sleep her balm denies,
my silent spirit sighs:
May Jesus Christ be praised.
When evil thoughts molest,
with this I shield my breast:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

3 Does sadness fill my mind?
A solace here I find:
May Jesus Christ be praised.
Or fades my earthly bliss?
My comfort still is this:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

4 Let earth's wide circle round
in joyful notes resound:
May Jesus Christ be praised.
Let air and sea and sky,
from depth to height, reply:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

5 Be this, while life is mine,
my canticle divine:
May Jesus Christ be praised!
Be this the eternal song
through all the ages long:
May Jesus Christ be praised!

Edward Caswall (altd)

PRAYERS of adoration & confession

Let us pray

Praise be to you, O God, the maker of the universe, by whose wisdom we are created and sustained.

Praise be to you, O God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose love we are redeemed and forgiven.

Praise be to you, O God, the source of all holiness, by whose Spirit we are made whole and brought to completion.

Praise be to you O God, source of all being, Eternal Word and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and shall be for ever.

Let us confess our sins to God.....

For our foolishness and our thoughtless use of the gifts of your creation,
Lord, have mercy.

For our neglect of you, and our failure to care for others,
Christ, have mercy.

For our selfishness in prayer, and our carelessness in worship,
Lord, have mercy.

Here is good news for all who put their trust in Christ: Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven".
Amen. Thanks be to God.

SCRIPTURE READING

Ephesians 5: 1-2, 15-20

5 Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him. ²Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.

¹⁵ So be careful how you live. Don't live like ignorant people, but like wise people. ¹⁶ Make good use of every opportunity you have, because these are evil days. ¹⁷ Don't be fools, then, but try to find out what the Lord wants you to do.

¹⁸ Do not get drunk with wine, which will only ruin you; instead, be filled with the Spirit.

¹⁹ Speak to one another with the words of psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts. ²⁰ In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, always give thanks for everything to God the Father.

Thanks be to God.

SERMON: *Mr Michael Smith*

As God's children, you must be like him (Ephesians 5:1)

Sometimes it does us good to "see ourselves as others see us", as Robert Burns once remarked. Christ himself reminds us that because we Christians are in "a city set on a hill that cannot be hidden", our behaviour is often going to be scrutinised and criticised by people hostile to our values – or at least, hostile to our failure to live up to the values we profess. Mahatma Gandhi once said "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike Christ." Perhaps he was talking about the obstinacy and imperialistic attitude of the British government in India, who claimed they were Christians while denying sovereignty to that nation; but of the Christian church in general, we have to say he was partly right, in the sense that we are all too human, still sinners. We must admit that we have a long way to go before we bear the true family likeness as children of God, as the letter to the Ephesians encourages us to be.

Thankfully, God is infinitely patient with his children, like any wise father who knows how much children have to learn about the business of right living; that is why we include a prayer of confession in our worship. God knows that deep down we sincerely want to be better people, and the letter circulated to the churches in Ephesus – and other local Christian communities – all those years ago still gives us good advice on how we should examine ourselves. The key to it is in how the text continues:

Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us, and gave his life for us... So this is not just a moral code to tell us 'you must try harder'! It points to Christ, not just as an example, but as a person whose living spirit can move us towards that family likeness we seek.

The Letter to the Ephesians offers both a challenge and a promise, which is the characteristic way of Scripture: what does it mean to 'be like Christ'?

FIRSTLY, become involved in human life and society! Jesus grew up in a family, learning to give and take; he worked alongside his father, and then with his brothers, as a carpenter. No stranger to hard work and long hours, his work also brought him into contact with people of all sorts, and he learned a lot about human nature. Out of this came real understanding, compassion and concern for people's quality of life – summed up in the word 'love' in its deepest sense. His ministry defines what is meant by love: reaching out to the poor and sick and the marginalised; respect for women, many of whom were denied respect under the social rules of the time; not being afraid to challenge the greedy and the hypocrites, but offering them the reconciling hand where a way through could be found; meeting the 'enemy' in the person of the Roman military presence, and recognising in all these people their essential humanity and need of a healing knowledge of God. If we are to become like Christ, here is the way; here is love.

SECONDLY, to live like Christ also involves us in dying like Christ. The challenge of the Gospel is not popular because it makes selfish and wicked people uncomfortable. Jesus died on a cross because his challenge was uncomfortable to his enemies. Many of his followers suffered a fate similar to his own, the 'ultimate sacrifice' of the martyr; some still do today in some countries. While that is unlikely to be our fate here and now, there are still ways in which we may find ourselves put under pressure by enemies of the faith. This works on two levels: the risk of criticism and active opposition from people who resent us, and the difficulty we face in trying to set up new socially valuable enterprises. Of the first kind was the attempt, a few years ago, to remove all the Gideon Bibles from local hospitals on the grounds that it was "discriminatory against Muslims" to allow them to remain. Fortunately the Muslim community denied they had any problem with the presence of the Bibles, and the bid to remove them failed. Of the second kind, one thinks of the many years of struggle it took for Christ-minded pioneers to persuade the British government to end the slavery of black people in the American colonies, or to recognise the rights of workers to organise trade unions against the interests of wealthy and powerful British traders and industrialists in the 19th century. William Booth had to call his movement to bring Christ to the poor 'The Salvation Army', because his efforts were often torn apart by gangs of ruffians paid by the brewery masters to shut him down. Booth's workers saw themselves as 'soldiers' in the war against drink, squalor and poverty, and suffered in that battle. In a very real sense they

were offering their lives as “a sweet smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God”. Just like Christ!

THIRDLY – and this is perhaps the most important point of all – if we really are God’s children, we are privileged to be included in the ‘*philadelphia*’, the special family Jesus came to create. The presence of the living Christ raises our faith from being merely an imitation of the example set by the earthly life of Christ, and faith becomes instead a new life energised by that presence which he promised. Christ does not simply say to us “You must try to do better”. He enables the desire for goodness within us to grow more into his likeness as we pray, as we work and have our being.

Put on the NEW SELF, which is created in God’s likeness,
and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy. (Ephesians 4:24)

We are sometimes encouraged to think that the church before the Reformation was totally corrupted by wealth and power struggles; in fact, long before Martin Luther there were influential churchmen who saw how the church was losing its way and acted to restore the balance and bring back holiness into the life of the Christian community in Europe. A movement arose in the 14th century called the *Devotio Moderna*, ‘The modern way of serving God’, a spiritual revival within the Catholic Church, which strongly emphasised both personal devotion and social involvement – exactly as the letter to the Ephesians is urging. One of its major pioneers was Geert Groote, a Dutchman converted to Christ in 1374, who wrote several tracts against the immorality of some clergy – and typically was banned from preaching as a result! He gathered a loyal group of supporters around him, and when he died in 1384 the movement had grown in influence through education and the founding of several schools.

Another of the writers expressing the *Devotio Moderna* beliefs was Thomas Haermerken, better known today as Thomas à Kempis. His book, ‘The Imitation of Christ’, has become one of the great Christian classics – still extensively read today – and for good reason; for in it we have, coming across the centuries, the essence of the real experience of Christ. To quote just some of his sayings:

ON KNOWING YOURSELF

A humble knowledge of yourself is a surer way to God than an
extensive search after learning.

We feel and weigh soon enough what we suffer from others, but
how much others suffer from us, of that we take no notice.

What is required of you is faith and a sincere life, not loftiness of
intellect or deep knowledge of the mysteries of God.

ON SACRIFICE

Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear
his cross. Many love Jesus as long as no hardship touches them.

Suffer with Christ, if you desire to reign with him.

ON THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

What can the world offer you without Jesus?

To be without Jesus is hell most grievous; to be with Jesus is to know
the sweetness of heaven.

There it is, then: the challenge and the promise. We shall never be perfect in an imperfect world. The invitation is first to examine our values, our priorities, in the light of Christ's teaching; then to accept life's difficulties and challenges without complaining; but finally to rejoice that we are not left without helper and friend, and in the knowledge that what is imperfect, unfinished, will one day achieve the completion that remains the loving plan of the Creator for all his children.

Thanks be to God.

HYMN: Jesus, where'er thy people meet

If you would like to sing this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment

1 Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
there they behold your mercy seat;
where'er they seek you, you are found,
and ev'ry place is hallowed ground.

2 For thou, within no walls confined,
inhabitest the humble mind;
such ever bring thee where they come,
and going, take thee to their home.

3 Here may we prove the pow'r of pray'r
to strengthen faith and sweeten care,
to teach our faint desires to rise,
and bring all heav'n before our eyes.

4 Lord, we are few, but you are near;
nor short thine arm, nor deaf thine ear;
O rend the heav'ns, come quickly down,
and make a thousand hearts thine own!

William Cowper

PRAYERS of intercession

Let us pray

Gracious and living Lord, we come in thanksgiving for all the mercies that have followed our church over the years; for those who built a community of faith and for those who have in their lifetimes patiently and sacrificially served the church, especially those whom we remember but see no longer.

We ask your grace and help to worship you in spirit and truth as we meet here, and in our daily lives, to be faithful to the gospel truths we proclaim, in a society that is spiritually barren; to welcome the stranger, and support our brothers and sisters in difficult times; to give generously of time, money, energy and skills to resource our church life.

We ask your blessing...

on all members of our fellowship,
on all who come here with questions and seeking meaning for their lives,
on all who experience here the outworking of Christian values,
on all who look to you in anxiety, sorrow, pain or bereavement.

Thus may your kingdom continue here in Walsall, and past blessings help us to shape a joyful future, blessed as we are by the promised presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

THE 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.**

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.

HYMN: Jesus, good above all other

*If you would like to **sing** this hymn, click the icon on the webpage for organ accompaniment.*

1 Jesus, good above all other,
gentle child of gentle mother,
in a stable born our brother,
give us grace to persevere.

2 Jesus, cradled in a manger,
for us facing every danger,
living as a homeless stranger,
now become our King most dear.

3 Jesus, for your people dying,
risen Master, death defying,
Lord in heaven, your grace supplying,
keep us in your presence near.

4 Jesus, who our sorrows bearing,
you our thoughts and hopes are sharing,
while to us the truth declaring;
help us all that truth to hear.

5 Lord, in all our living guide us;
let no pride or hate divide us;
we'll go on with you beside us,
and with joy we'll persevere!

Percy Dearmer (altd)

BLESSING

Let us pray

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

The love of the Father enfold you,
the wisdom of the Son enlighten you,
the fire of the Spirit enflame you;

and the blessing of God, the Three in One, be upon you and abide with you now and for ever.

Amen.