

Order of Service 14 March 2021

Call to Worship

When we cried to God in our trouble,
God saved us from our distress;
God sent out the Word and healed us.
Creator God, we come together
as witnesses to your glory, as bearers of your good news,
as hopeful children, as loving friends,
as a community seeking your wisdom.

Hymn Come Down O Love Divine <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIvKDgktutI>

Yesterday marked 25 years since the Dunblane Massacre, when 16 children and their teacher were gunned down in their primary school. After a moment of silence, I will share with you a prayer written by the Moderator of the church.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, yourself once a child, vulnerable and at risk,
In silence we pray when words are not enough to capture the depths within, Or simply an intrusion into that place within us, where quietness should dwell...
Within these walls, that have rung with the laughter and the songs of children, and witnessed the tears and heartbroken prayers of adults,
we remember, and we pray...
We remember all those who will, forever, remain as children in our hearts...
We remember a teacher whose greatest instinct was to protect those entrusted to her care...
We remember the parents, the siblings, the grandparents, the friends, who will always mourn...
We remember all who bear scars to this very day...
As the fragile snowdrop breaks through the cold winter earth,
And somehow endures the elements that buffet it,
We give thanks for the resilience of many, and for the determination, arising out of tragedy, this country should be safer place than it used to be.
We pray for children throughout the world who are denied adequate food or clean water, or the education or opportunity through which their gifts can develop.
We pray for all children whose innocence is abused, and whose spirits wither through lack of encouragement.
We pray for all parents, whose hearts are breaking.
Christ, the healer,
We pray for all whose spirits are broken,
Whose bodies are weak or threatened by disease,
Or whose minds are tormented.
Bring healing, bring peace.
We pray those who govern, that they may always strive for justice for all, and for a fairer, safer world.
We pray for your Church, that with courage, humility, imagination and faithfulness, it may follow, and demonstrate, the way of Christ.
And we remember all those whom we love and have lost, be they young or old.
Within the communion of saints, in all its variety, may they, even when out of our sight, continue to inspire us as they behold you face, God of heaven and earth.
All our prayers, and those too deep for any words, we offer through Christ our Lord. Amen.

On the 25th Anniversary of the Dunblane massacre, we remember all families who have been victims of violence as we share together
There's a Place prepared for little children

<https://www.facebook.com/AberlourParishChurch/videos/483475526315129> OR
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yu98_at7Wr9VQ6c685tBHEFCliy6tSNo/view?fbclid=IwAR2XXeO5xNPpVVGjmkhsamr34HEPkxPZv55b_G-22OucW9z3oMWLJaUH2mw

Reflection: Happy Mother's Day?

For many women and mothers this has not been a good week.

International Women's Day was marked on Monday,
with the UN statement:

Women of the world want and deserve an equal future free from stigma, stereotypes and violence;
a future that's sustainable, peaceful, with equal rights and opportunities for all.

It's a great ambition for the future of half the population.

And yet as some of us are celebrating Mothering Sunday with cards flowers and maybe the chance for family members to meet up,
we can hardly ignore the reality of some other reports in the news.

In Royal family circles the week has been marked by anger, division, accusation and hurt played out in news headlines. Quite apart from their role in the life of the UK, this is a family who are being driven apart by allegations made public and spread round the world, and the bitterness is troubling to watch.

Meanwhile in London a young woman going about her daily life and heading home from visiting friends has been murdered. The man accused of the crime is a police officer charged with protecting the public.

In Dundee another woman and her young child are presumed murdered in circumstances that are not yet clear.

In Scotland the controversial 'Hate Crime Bill' has been passed. Whether it will be effective or not is open to question, but the reason behind it is not. It was introduced because even in our wee corner of the world, this is a country where examples of hatred and abuse are still far too common.

These are the sad examples of what our reading from John's Gospel is speaking about, in a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus the Pharisee: that there are all kinds of darkness in this world, that there are those who choose to do evil deeds, and that the world needs to be saved and healed, and darkness replaced by light. Jesus declares:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever trusts in him should not perish but have eternal life.

And it goes on: for God did not send his son into the world to condemn it but in order that the world might be saved through him.

God loved it despite its faults, and because he loved, he gave.

Women of the world want and deserve an equal future free from stigma, stereotypes and violence;
a future that's sustainable, peaceful, with equal rights and opportunities for all.

Which takes us back to Mother's Day. Many mothers give unstintingly of their love, their time, their practical care, often unrecognised by a society which tends to notice people in positions of greater power. This is a day for doing our bit to recognise unsung caring together. Loving and giving go together. And yes, we recognise that many dads are also kind and caring, and that in some households children do suffer badly from abuse and neglect by one or both parents. We think of other women who would love to have had children cannot, and mothers who have lost children, and children who have lost mothers for whom this day may bring a range of struggles.

Nowadays Mother's Day has become very commercial, but in times past the opportunities for poorer girls and women were often very limited, as they are still in many parts of the world. In Victorian times, domestic service provided the basics of work food and shelter, and on one Sunday each year girls had the chance to go home to their families often with a small gift for their mothers. It recognised the importance of family, and the often unsung work of mothers in raising children.

If you have children or grandchildren, or work with children, never forget the influence you have, and the role model you can be. In good times and bad.

If you love people, you want the best for them, and any parent knows one of the hardest things is to see your child hurt. One person who did see her son horribly rejected and killed was Jesus' mother Mary. But as he was growing up, who was it showed him what caring for others looked like? All through his ministry he shows a real empathy with women and children and vulnerable people which must have started in the home.

Last week we were reading about Jesus, not gentle Jesus meek and mild but outraged Jesus in the temple. Too many religious paintings and hymns do the same to Mary, and show her as a kind of passive domestic incubator.

Maybe she had a temper too, and just as strong a sense of justice? After all she was related to John the Baptist who wasn't soft spoken or passive! And how many of us were taught at Sunday School about David and Goliath or Joshua fighting Jericho but never heard the stories of strong women like Samuel's mother Hannah, Deborah the judge or Queen Esther who saved her people?

There are those who held vigils for the young woman killed in London, hoping that a sense of solidarity will help take away some anxiety. I fear that vigils are not enough. As with George Floyd last summer in America, maybe the focus on one person's death will highlight issues round the killing of others, but I also know there is a long way to go before women feel safe on the streets or free to leave oppressive partners and it needs to involve both men and women.

Salvation is linked to the word salve, something that heals. John's gospel says Jesus gave himself to heal the world. He didn't look at the world to find fault and condemn it, he loved the world. It says God had such a high regard for the world, that he was prepared to send his only son to make sure the way to life was open for everyone. We call it Grace, love not bought or deserved, but a gift without strings.

Which is the point of Jesus being lifted up on the cross like the bronze snake in the desert. The Israelites had been moaning about God and thought snake bites were a punishment. So Moses set up the bronze snake, and anyone who looked at it was healed. Snakes were known for being reborn and leaving their old skin behind, and so they became a sign of new life.

John's gospel uses the same idea: when Jesus is lifted up on a cross, anyone who looks to him for help will be given life. The gift of life is for everyone, no strings attached. Just as anyone who is bitten can look to the serpent for healing; anyone who believes in Jesus can look to him for life.

This Mothering Sunday, let's remember that Jesus had a mother, give thanks for her influence and teaching and for our own experiences of being cared for.

Through loving and giving, despite the dark days, we are promised that there is light and hope for the world. Facing an uncertain future, Mary said

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour

Another hymn that was written and sung at that time.

Hymn 'Dunblane' by Jean Holloway

**TUNE 'Melita' Eternal Father, strong to save
(For those in peril on the sea)**

O Father on your love we call When sorrow overshadows all
And pain that feels too great to bear Drives from us any words of prayer
Enfold in love for evermore All those we love but see no more

Our children beautiful and dear Were strangers to a world of fear
Their precious lives had more to give In them, our hopes and dreams could live
Enfold in love for evermore All those we love but see no more

So brief the joy since they were born So long the years in which to mourn
Give us compassion to sustain Each other in this time of pain
Enfold in love for evermore All those we love but see no more

Guard us from bitterness and hate And share with us grief's crushing weight
Help us to live from day to day Until once more we find our way
Enfold in love for evermore All those we love but see no more

When dark despair is all around And falling tears are all around
Light one small flame of hope that still You walk with us and always will
Enfold in love for evermore All those we love but see no more.

Numbers 21:4-9

New International Version

The Bronze Snake

⁴They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea,^a to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

⁶Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

⁸The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." ⁹So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:14-21

New International Version

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,^[a] ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”^b

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Prayer before Sermon

Even in the context of the John 3:16 the best known verse
about the saving power of God’s eternal love,
We hear about the power of evil and darkness,
as we seek truth and light.
In these times, we may question God, or simply ask ourselves,
When will there be good news?
When Lord when?
I know I find myself asking that a lot lately.
And judging from the passage in Numbers today it’s a question
which I am sure the Israelites would have been asking as well.
They were lost, and not being allowed passage through Edom.
Miriam and Aaron, the sister and brother of Moses had both just died.
Some of their number had been attacked or captured.
But they then destroyed the cities of the Canaanites.
They had no water or bread, and did not like the food.
They found a way around but some were growing impatient.
And then the Lord sent the snakes among them, and many more died,
But those who were bitten and turned and
looked at the bronze snake were spared.
When will there be good news Lord? When Lord when?
After this week in the news, we are left with just as many questions
as there were for the Israelites in Egypt.
But, Faith stories sometimes need to be left there sometimes when
we cannot, with integrity, explain, rationalise
or find the good news in them.
Surely this is better than offering a simple reasoning
that neither expands our understanding of God
or deepens our relationship with love.
As with all biblical passages, these verses are written
from the experience and emotions
of God’s People rather than God- self.
These are the retelling of experiences
in the life of Israel in the desert that
the Israelites themselves could not understand or explain.
That is a good place to be at times for us:
to know the bible offers us passages
written in a crisis where meaning is hard to find.
We also have the experience of a global pandemic,

and mark a year since the first person in Scotland died from Covid-19.
This past year has reshaped us and will continue to do so
from governments, to communities, to economy, to faith.
It is something we may never understand in an existential way,
but can seek ways to grow from.
Perhaps one of the dangers of this passage
is the sense that the snakes remain.
There is a deeply nuanced instruction here not to complain
because you know what the punishment will be.
Is this not dangerously close to religious imperialism
and so very far from the Good News of Jesus Christ.
The deepest truth in our faith is about love.
Love is a freedom. Love is unconditional. Love is robust
and not forced on us to behave in a particular way.
Enough people to hurt the faith have seen HIV, cancer, Covid-19,
earthquakes, rape and murder, even a barren womb all sent
as punishment for our morals and choices
in life as individuals and nations.
That kind of theology is found in deserts with snakes,
not on the cross of love.
But the symbolism of having the bronze snake on a pole
which has to be looked at in order to be healed, has some merit.
Just not in the sense that God controls the antidote
to the disease or crisis God sent in the first place.
Rather than God simply removing the problem,
for us to look upon our wrongdoing,
the pain and hurt we cause, in coming face to face with the issue,
we begin to recognise what the darkness,
and come into the light, we begin to heal.
Facing the issue is often the starting point
towards renewal and growth
in our communities and individually.
As with other issues, like the campaign born
out of the grief of those who lost their children in Dunblane,
Which resulted in a dramatic change in gun laws,
Such times of pain and distress can stir people to work for justice.
In some bigger sense this passage, then, is a story about dealing
with sin, hurt, pain in the world face to face.
You can't avoid it.
We are called to face it and grow from there.

Prayers For Others And Ourselves

Loving God, just as Moses prayed for your people,
we come together in prayer;
look upon us with care and compassion,
shine your light on us that we might live.
Out of the darkness of fear your people seek support and reassurance,
as the world continues to struggle with war, poverty, disease, violence and hate, we pray for all
those who are fearful;
for all those worrying if it is safe to go home tonight,

or wondering what tomorrow may bring.

Help them to have hope, embolden them and guide them,
and grant us the strength to be constant companions
to all those in need of your love.

In a time of confusion and strife, we pray for all those who are frustrated, those who desire a different, more peaceful world,
more compassionate communities, and a more equal society for all of your children, regardless of age, gender or background.

We pray for all those who are angry, for those who see and know injustice, but have little power to create change.

We pray especially for women and children.

Help them to have satisfaction and justice in your eternal love and understanding, and grant us the strength to be constant companions
to all those in need of your love.

As our world changes, and your church continues
to search for its place at the heart of our communities,
we pray for those seeking wisdom, seeking a way forward,
to carry out your mission, and spread your word
and carry your love to the whole world.

Help them to find new paths, and reinvigorate what they have long known, and grant us the strength to be constant companions to all those in need of your love.

Amen.

Hymn Guide me, O thou great Redeemer <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5j48TLRb4Q>

Sending

Go in peace, with your eyes and your hearts
focussed on the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus
and the communion of the Holy Spirit, today, tomorrow and always. AMEN