

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship

Let our delight be in the law of the Lord,
and on his law may we meditate day and night.

Psalm 1 .2

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 25th October 2020. Autumn is beginning to bite now so I may be doing more reflections inside over the coming weeks, but there are some 'on locations' planned too.

Today's opening prayer. Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

God, sometimes following you seems so complicated.
We think there are so many laws, so many expectations,
so much expected of us.
Help us to see that there are just three things
that you need us to do:
To love you,
to love our neighbour,
and to love ourselves.
Amen.

Mike Claridge

I don't know what your bookcases are like. One of the delights of video conferencing during lock down has been spying on other people's book cases. Are they immaculate, with books neatly arranged? If so how, I saw one arranged somewhat bizarrely by colour! Maybe by subject, author, genre or some other system. Or maybe just wherever that sized book will fit. The best ones though are those where books look like they've just been tossed into place, piled up or scattered around. They look well thumbed and read. That's my excuse anyway - and the look I'm going for here as you can see.

A good collection of books has a variety of types. Fiction and non-fiction. History, poetry, nature. Treasured books from childhood perhaps. Books from hobbies indulged in long ago. For those entrusted with preaching there's always a selection of bibles, hymn and prayer books and other resources too. A good bookcase is a mini-library and once you start browsing who knows what you'll end up finding out or where your literary journey will take you.

One of the frequent questions I get is "Do you believe in the Bible?". I love to reply along the lines of "Do you believe in the bookcase?" or "Do you believe in the library?". The Bible isn't a book, it's a collection of books. Just like a well used bookcase those books are a bit jumbled up and it isn't always obvious what kind of writing they are. History is alongside fiction, poetry alongside letters or journals. Scripture, written by people and inspired by God, tells of a journey already undertaken, and that we are part of today. Some words of Charles Wesley:

Come, divine Interpreter,
bring us eyes your book to read,
ears the mystic words to hear,
words which do from you proceed,
words that endless bliss impart,
kept in an obedient heart.

All who read, or hear, are blest,
if your plain commands we do;
of your kingdom here possessed ,
you we shall in glory view -
when you come on earth to abide,
reign triumphant at your side.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

At the front of your bible is The Pentateuch, it means five books - Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Just to confuse us even more those each contain mixtures of literature but there's a lot of law in there - laws that sometimes were applicable to their time, and of less use to us today, and other laws that stood the test of time and shaped the faith of generations that followed.

Two short sentences, from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, are examples of this.

Deuteronomy 6 .5 (NRSV)

5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Leviticus 19 .18 (NRSV)

18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Today's Gospel reading is an end. It's the end of the public disputes between the religious leaders in the temple and Jesus. Now their opposition will go 'underground', plotting with the Roman authorities. The next few chapters involve Jesus teaching the crowds and his own disciples. But first the religious leaders have one more question to ask:

Matthew 22 .34-40 (NRSV)

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' 37 He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

The first part of Jesus answer, to love the Lord your God, forms part of daily Jewish prayer. But was Jesus the first to link these two commands together? We don't know, but probably not. It seems to have already been in existence as a summary of the law. Jesus had shocked and challenged the authorities with some of his answers to earlier questions. To this answer they can have no complaints.

But before the disputes end it's time for Jesus to turn the tables and ask a question:

Matthew 22 .41-46 (NRSV)

41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42 'What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?' They said to him, 'The son of David.' 43 He said to them, 'How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44 "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet' " ? 45 If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?' 46 No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Who do the pharisees think that the Messiah will be? The Messiah, God's anointed one, was long expected and belief was that he would be descended from the line of David, the great King of Israel who'd reigned nearly 1000 years before Jesus' time. The prophet Isaiah (9.2-7 and 11.1-3 among other references) was among those who'd promised this. The pharisees thought they were on sound ground.

But Jesus confuses them. It believed that the Book of Psalms, ancient songs of praise, had been written by King David himself. Jesus quotes from one:

Psalm 110

1 The Lord says to my Lord,
sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies your footstool

How can it be, asks Jesus, that David would call one of his own descendants 'Lord'?

Jesus isn't denying that the Messiah is the son of David. The emphasis is that he is far more than this. The Christian belief that had emerged by the time Matthew was that Jesus was not merely a human Messiah but that he was Son of God. Matthew's Gospel had eluded to this earlier when it spoke of Jesus as "something greater than the Temple and greater than Solomon" (Matthew 12 .6, 41).

None of the pharisees were able to give an answer to Jesus question "What do you think of the Messiah?" The answer remained hidden from the outwardly learned and those wise in earthly terms. A true knowledge of the Messiah would only be encountered in love, and sacrificial love at that, a love that warms our hearts and changes our lives.

As the poet and priest John Keble said:

Blest are the pure in heart,
for they shall see our God:
the secret of the Lord is theirs;
their soul is Christ's abode.

Still to the lowly soul,
he does himself impart,
and for his dwelling and his throne
chooses the pure in heart.

John Keble (1792-1866)

Closing remarks

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next Sunday is All Saints Day and that will be our focus as we give thanks for the holy ones of God.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!'

Psalm 96 .8-10a

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 18th October 2020. I was out on the bike this week and decided to record the opening part of the video version of this reflection 'old school' with the camera hand held. I was cycling along the Worcester and Birmingham Canal, from Kings Norton towards Bournville and stopped near Lifford Lane bridge. There's a vividly graffitied wall there and, behind that wall was once located Kings Norton Metal Company. There's a link with today's Gospel reading, but more about that later.

Today's reading is another encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders. They try and trap Jesus with a question about whether they should pay taxes to Caesar. A coin features in that discussion, and a coin also features when I talk about that site next to the canal and Lifford Lane Bridge.

But first the opening prayer. Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

God, we are citizens of the land in which we live,
but we are also citizens of your Kingdom.
When there is conflict between our loyalty to each;
give us grace to uphold the values of your kingdom,
strength to face persecution,
courage to speak out for justice and righteousness,
a voice to speak for the voiceless,
and to proclaim that only your Kingdom is eternal.
This we ask in the name of Jesus Christ,
our Lord and King.

Amen.

Mike Claridge

I know that it's hard to believe, but I was at primary school when decimalisation came. That was 1971 but of course some of the new coins came out earlier, with the 5 New Pence and 10 New Pence coins being issued in 1968. I remember that there was great excitement on the playground when someone had the first 10 New Pence coin - the one with the lion and the crown on it. The new coins were the same size and value as the old shilling and two shilling coins which both remained in circulation alongside the new ones. The 2 shilling coin was also known as a Florin. Did you know though that the 2 shilling coin was introduced in Queen Victoria's reign as the first attempt at decimalisation?

Some of the early coins bear the words “One Tenth of a Pound”, there being 20 shillings to the pound before decimalisation.

One of the things that’s surprising, when you look back at it now, is the size of those pre-decimalisation coins. Most of them were made at the Royal Mint in London. Back before a date in the 1920s silver coins really were silver, the coins being made from sterling silver. Precious metals were being used at the Royal Mint. But the penny, the halfpenny and the farthing were made from base metal - copper. Some of those were made elsewhere, many of them were made in Birmingham by a company called Heaton’s at Hockley in the Jewellery Quarter. If you turn the coin over and look where the date is you might see a small H. that’s stands for Heaton’s, its’a Birmingham made coin. But in 1918 and 1919 some of them were made in Kings Norton. Alongside the date you’ll find a tiny KN for Kings Norton. Kings Norton Metal Company had made coins for many years for elsewhere in the world and had also made blanks for the Royal Mint to strike into coins. But in 1918 and 1919 coins were struck right here in Kings Norton.

The site where the Kings Norton Metal Company was is still industrial today but there’s nothing to see of the old factory. It’ now Melchett Road, part of Kings Norton Business Park. But there, for two short years, part of the coinage of the realm was produced. Which brings us to today’s Gospel reading:

Matthew 22 .15-22 - The question of paying tax to Caesar

15 Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 16 So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, ‘Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. 17 Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?’ 18 But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, ‘Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? 19 Show me the coin used for the tax.’ And they brought him a denarius. 20 Then he said to them, ‘Whose head is this, and whose title?’ 21 They answered, ‘The emperor’s.’ Then he said to them, ‘Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ 22 When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

The Gospel readings at the moment reflect the escalation in tensions between Jesus and the religious authorities. But the religious authorities now want to get the occupying foreign power onside - the Romans - and to do so have recruited the supporters of Herod - King of Judea by name, but a puppet king of the Roman regime. Only Rome had execution on the statute book and, if Jesus was to be out of the way once and for all, Rome would be needed to condemn him.

They try to trap him, and the Greek word used here is a hunting term meaning to entangle or to snare. They ask him a question; “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?”. Simple enough question, but a tricky one to answer.

If Jesus were to say - “Yes of course, you must the tax” then his opponents could say “He’s collaborating with the occupying Romans” and turn his supporters against him.

If Jesus were to say - "No way, don't pay that" he'll put himself on the side of the zealots who resist the Romans with force.

Jesus is on a sticky wicket, but he plays a straight bat in answering.

Seemingly, like the Queen today, Jesus and his disciples don't seem to carry cash and he has to ask his inquisitors for a coin. They produce a denarius, equivalent to a labourer's daily wage and hand it to him. He looks at it and asks "Whose head and title is this?". The answer is obvious - it's the emperor's. Then give it to the emperor he replies.

Confounded - a poem by Marjorie Dobson

All he needed was a coin
to confound their connivance.

Pharisees would not show their faces,
so sent their disciples to distract him
and the Herodians to harass him.

But malice and menace was their motive
and entrapment was their end game
for he was considered as an enemy.

Their disciples invoked his integrity
and made their far from innocent enquiry,
"Is Caesar within his right to seize our taxes?"

The Herodians held their breath.
Would he condemn himself to the court of Herod?

But he caught the coin and called, "Heads?
You lose! The head and coin are Caesar's.
Give God what God has first given us."

And they gazed, amazed, at Jesus' way
of double dealing with them
and left lamely licking their wounds
to report their rout.

Marjorie Dobson

Having dodged the trap that the Pharisees and Herodians have set Jesus takes the opportunity to remind them that, as well as giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, they must give to God what belongs to God. We're back in the vineyard again, where the tenants failed to produce the harvest. The same word Greek word is used meaning to render or to give. The paying tax to Caesar, and what we owe God, are not gifts to them, but are our due. as citizens of an earthly kingdom but also the Kingdom of God.

We're called to yield to God the harvest of lives of love, righteousness, justice and peace. But if those conflict with the demands of the state, of our earthly rulers, then our call is to follow God.

It's heads I win and tails you lose - a hymn by Andrew Pratt

It's heads I win and tails you lose:
terms calculated to abuse,
such tangled words to trip Christ up,
a poisoned chalice, bitter cup.

But Jesus saw right through their plan,
a subtle, thoughtful, cunning man;
he played with language, used his skill,
soon turned the tables to his will.

'Whose head is [it] on this coin here?'
his question sowed a seed of fear.
A trap had opened deep and wide
where intellect could slip and slide.

Whatever answer they might give
would demonstrate how each would live.
A time of crisis, time of choice:
how should they answer to his voice?

And what of us? If we invest
in worldly things, what of the rest?
Can God lay claim to time and space?
What do we owe for love and grace?

All that we have, all that we are,
our lives, each joy, each tear, each scar,
all these we owe to God, our debt;
our choice to give or to regret.

Andrew Pratt 13/9/2011

Closing remarks

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week Jesus is quizzed about the Commandments and as to which of those is the most important.

Take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

Please note that this is a written version rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship

On this mountain the Lord of hosts
will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow,
of well-matured wines strained clear.....
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Isaiah 25 .6,9a

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 11th October 2020. Today a wedding takes centre stage as the setting for two parables. The stories, told by Jesus and retold by Matthew in his Gospel, illustrate thoughts about the Kingdom of God. Who is invited? Who responds to the invitation? Who attends? Are they, are we, ready?

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

God, you call us to a banquet,
where you have laid on a feast of the richest fare
and the choicest wine.
We are unworthy of your invitation.
Help us to respond,
that we may be found ready
to participate in your feast,
clothed in righteousness and grace.
Amen.

Mike Claridge

As a keen amateur genealogist, family tree researcher, I love looking at marriage registers. Many of the records are online these days but, if they are just transcripts, they don't always tell the full story. A transcript will give names, addresses and occupations of the couple and their fathers. But if you can see an image of the register or, better still, the registers themselves, you can sometimes find notes that tell fascinating details.

In my previous post there was a register from the early 20th century which contained an entry where all the details were there, but no signatures. Instead the entry had been crossed out and a note said "Marriage called off on the morning of the wedding due to groom being admitted to hospital for an emergency operation". All was well though as, a few pages later, there was a new entry and the wedding had taken place.

In another register from between the two World Wars, there were two weddings on one day where all details were complete and signed and the ceremonies had taken place. But a note in the margin indicated there was a problem. It said "Married outside permitted hours". It used to be the case that weddings had to take place between 7am and 6pm.

Both of these had taken place outside those hours. In this case the couples had to come back a couple of weeks later and go through their ceremonies again. It turned out there was a deeper story. Apparently the Vicar had forgotten about the weddings and gone to watch the Albion play! When another clergyman was found it was late, he did the ceremony but was later told it wasn't valid. Back they all came for another go.

Before the First World War one of the favourite days for weddings was Christmas Day. For those working 'in service' it was one of the only days, except Sundays, that people had off. I've seen registers with as many as seven weddings on one Christmas Day.

Back in Jesus' day, as in many cultures today, wedding ceremonies took place over many days and were elaborate ceremonies where food was plentiful and wine flowed freely. It is one such event, and a royal one no less, that Jesus tells us about in our parables today.

Matthew 22 .1-10 - The parable of the Wedding Feast

1 Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: 2 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. 3 He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. 4 Again he sent other slaves, saying, "Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet." 5 But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his slaves, maltreated them, and killed them. 7 The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. 8 Then he said to his slaves, "The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. 9 Go therefore into the main streets, and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet." 10 Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

We've heard in the last few weeks of the Kingdom of God compared with a Vineyard. Another image of God's Kingdom, throughout scripture, is that of a feast, in this case a wedding feast.

Again the parable is addressed to Jesus opponents, who see themselves as part of God's Kingdom by right. But they've moaned about outsiders being included, paid only lip service to it's responsibilities), failed to produce a harvest and rejected those who'd challenged them.

Now Matthew tells us about Jesus changing the imagery from the vineyard to a feast. It's a story about the wedding of a king's son and heir and the great feast that follows it. A grand affair and, although invitations were sent out, no one responded. Messengers were sent to remind them, but those invited gave their various excuses and even killed the messengers! The King is outraged but decides to widen the invitation. All are now invited - good and bad - and soon the banqueting hall is packed.

Like last week there's a lot of violence in this parable. Not only are the messengers met with violence but the king responds with violence too! Matthew possibly added this in light of the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome in 70AD, around the time he was writing his Gospel.

The story illustrates a by now familiar point about the Kingdom of God. Those who think they are part of it, but behave otherwise or take their place for granted, reject God's invitation. But there's plenty of room in the Kingdom of God and, as Jesus ministry and followers showed, they were sometimes the most surprising people.

But this is Matthew's Gospel, and he's added a twist to the tale.

Matthew 22 .11-14 - The Parable of the Wedding Garment

11 'But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, 12 and he said to him, "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?" And he was speechless. 13 Then the king said to the attendants, "Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." 14 For many are called, but few are chosen.'

This is a separate parable that Matthew has added. It doesn't occur in Luke's version (1). It raises more questions. There's no evidence that guests at a wedding had to wear special robes, but they would be expected to "make an effort" with washed garments. But in today's first parable the invitation to those who eventually sit down is 'last minute'. They wouldn't have had the chance to do their laundry. What point is being made here?

If Jesus had a favourite passage of scripture what we know as Isaiah 61 would be a candidate (2). It includes:

Isaiah 61 .10

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Being clothed by God with a fine garment is a symbol of righteousness elsewhere in scripture (3). It's a symbol of a place in The Kingdom of God. God has given us grace and offers us forgiveness. In response we are called to repentance and renewal of life - to put on the garment of salvation and righteousness that we may be suitably attired when the time for scrutiny arrives.

For our closing prayer I'm using George Herbert's poem 'Love bade me welcome'. Unworthy though we are, God calls us to the feast and to sit and eat of the Kingdom of God.

Let us pray:

Love bade me welcome

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne,
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack'd any thing.
A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?
Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

Closing remarks

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week the Pharisees set out to trap Jesus with a question about the Inland Revenue.

For now, take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!

Notes:

- (1) Luke's version is Luke 14 .16-24
- (2) Jesus is also depicted as using Isaiah 61 at:
Matthew 5 .3 and 11 .5. Luke 4 .18 and 7 .22
- (3) See Revelation 3 .4,5,18 and 19 .8. See also Mark 2. 21 and Luke 15 .22

Please note that this is a written version of the video reflection rather than a transcript.

Call to Worship

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
and is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

*Psalm 118 .22 - 24
(and quoted by Jesus in Matthew 21 .42)*

Welcome to my reflection for The Cotteridge Church on Sunday 4th October 2020. Those words of our Call to Worship, taken from Psalm 118, will crop up again in our Gospel reading.

I'm back in Pelsall today, where I was born and brought up. This immense stone is often the subject of conversation around here. Nobody knows what it is or why it's here. It's clearly been 'worked' and you can see the marks from that. At some point in its history it's been abandoned here, 'a stone that builders rejected' perhaps. A reference to the second part of our Gospel reading today More about the stone after our Opening Prayer.

Let us pray.

Opening Prayer

Gracious God,
when we grab and hold on to
what we believe to be ours, and ours alone:
Challenge us.

When we reject your Word because
it challenges us in uncomfortable ways:
Forgive us.

When we fail to accept the forgiveness
that you offer us in Christ:
Be patient with us.

When we fail to be patient as we struggle
to respond to your love:
Be with us, in Christ, we pray:
Amen.

Mike Claridge

Some people say this is a coffin stone. Coffin bearers would rest the casket here while on the way from the station, just over there, to the church just over there. Maybe it was here anyway and it was useful for that purpose anyway.

Others says it's a gravestone of a horse! Either belonging to the local Vicar or a drayman - which sounds a good combination anyway.

No body knows how long it's been here. My dad remembers it being here pre-war.

Myself? I guess its a water trough that's been abandoned here upside-down. Whatever it is it's clearly been rejected and abandoned.

Jesus speaks of a 'rejected stone' later, but in the first part of our Gospel reading we have a parable, a story, with more murder than an episode of *Midsummer Murders*. As in the previous two weeks it's set in a vineyard - a vineyard being a frequent image for the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 21 .33-41

33 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country.

34 When the harvest time had come, he sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. 35 But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. 36 Again he sent other slaves, more than the first; and they treated them in the same way. 37 Finally he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." 38 But when the tenants saw the son, they said to themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and get his inheritance." 39 So they seized him, threw him out of the vineyard, and killed him. 40 Now when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?' 41 They said to him, 'He will put those wretches to a miserable death, and lease the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the produce at the harvest time.'

What's odd about that vineyard? What are many churches celebrating around now? Harvest. What's odd about the vineyard is that there is no harvest. There are no grapes mentioned until right at the end. The wine press stands empty, the tenants haven't been productive.

This is one of the few parables that is pure allegory - most aren't, this one is. God's people are supposed to be producing fruits of love, righteousness, justice and peace. But they aren't. Time and time again we - for we are the tenants - have rejected God's messengers, often violently, historically often fatally. This is the same rejection of God's purposes that led to the rejection of the Son - of Jesus. Matthew presses the point home. Jesus was thrown out of Jerusalem and killed, just like the son in the parable.

There are no grapes, no fruits of love, righteousness, justice or peace. It is time for a new tenancy.

Matthew knows about the crucifixion, but also he knows about the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He knows that in Christ we can be a new creation. We may have been the old tenants, but we are called to a new life. We have another chance to produce that harvest of love, righteousness, justice and peace.

Let us unclench our fists that have threatened God's messengers and sought to hoard what we believed was ours. Let us open our hearts to the new life that will bring fruit of God's Kingdom.

Let us pray:

So much for so little (based on Matthew 21 .33-46)

Loving God,
you have given so much and ask so little -
a loving heart, an open mind,
and a willingness to accept others.
Why then do we try and hoard your love
in clenched fists,
protecting our place and fighting our corner,
when all the time
your love is unconditional and generous;
a love that surpasses boundaries,
and invites us to welcome all.

We know when we are limiting your love
through our words and actions,
and yet, somehow, we cannot help ourselves.
Strengthen us to walk the way of Jesus,
allowing his message of love
to transform our lives,
and open our hearts to love you more.

Loving God, you have given us so much;
may we respond with generosity and love
for you and for all people.

*Heather Whyte - URC Minister, Luton and Dunstable Pastorate
taken from 'Prayers from the Heart', URC Prayer Handbook 2020.*

'The stone that the builders have rejected'. The second part of the Gospel reading today begins with a quote from Psalm 118. We used it as the Call to Worship today. Here it again now as Jesus pointedly directs the parable he's just told, to his opponents - the religious leaders. They are rejecting him - but they will themselves be rejected.

Matthew 21 .42-46

42 Jesus said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures:
"The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone;
this was the Lord's doing,
and it is amazing in our eyes"?'
43 Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given
to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom. 44 The one who falls on this
stone will be broken to pieces; and it will crush anyone on whom it falls.'

45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realised that he was speaking about them. 46 They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet.

The whole point of a cornerstone was that it was the reference point from which the rest of the building would be constructed. It's angles needed to be true and its alignment accurate. Measurements and angles for all further walls would be taken with reference to. Until surveying tools advanced in design, a true cornerstone was important if what was to be built was to be sound and stable.

The leaders that rejected Jesus' teaching and ministry. Soon they would reject and kill him! But they would discover that what they were rejecting was indeed a true cornerstone. Jesus Christ; cornerstone, reference point, foundation and head of a new vineyard where fruits of love and righteousness, justice and peace will flourish.

Let us pray:

Christ is made the sure foundation,
Christ the head and cornerstone.
chosen of the the Lord, and precious,
binding all the Church in one,
holy Zion's help for ever,
and her confidence alone. Amen

*From a 7th Century hymn
translated by John Mason Neale (1811-1866)*

Closing remarks

We have been offered a new place in the vineyard. That Call to Worship from Psalm 118 reminds us we are part of a new beginning, a new day, grounded on the new Cornerstone of the Kingdom of God.

The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing;
and is marvellous in our eyes.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Psalm 118 .22,23

Thank you for joining me for this reflection today. As always there's a written version on the resource site. Next week there's a wedding and, topically enough, there's a problem selecting who should be on the guest list.

For now, take care, stay safe, and the best of all God is with us!