

Sunday 20th February
– Second Sunday Before Lent
Morning Worship
Led by Sue Nelms, LLM



Gathering and Greeting

We come from scattered lives to meet with God.
Let us recognize his presence with us.

Silence is kept.

**As God's people we have gathered:
let us worship him together.**

Opening Prayer

Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal:
have mercy on us.

**Holy God,
holy and strong,
holy and immortal:
have mercy on us.**

Silence

Eternal God, source of all blessing,
help us to worship you
with all our heart and mind and strength;
for you alone are God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
for ever and ever.

Amen.

Hymn – Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us

- 1 Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
 o'er the world's tempestuous sea;
 guard us, guide us, keep us, feed us,
 for we have no help but thee;
 yet possessing every blessing,
 if our God our Father be.

- 2 Saviour, breathe forgiveness o'er us:
 all our weakness thou dost know;
 thou didst tread this earth before us,
 thou didst feel its keenest woe;
 lone and dreary, faint and weary,
 through the desert thou didst go.

- 3 Spirit of our God, descending,
 fill our hearts with heavenly joy,
 love with every passion blending,
 pleasure that can never cloy:
 thus provided, pardoned, guided,
 nothing can our peace destroy.

Meditation on the Lordsbridge Team Prayer

Lord God

In your love you sent your Son.

In your grace

You called us back to you.

In your mission

You placed us where we are

And formed us into a team.

Call us onward

Into your purposes and growth

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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

May the God of love and power
forgive us and free us from our sins,
heal and strengthen us by his Spirit,
and raise us to new life in Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Readings by Michaela McNeill

Genesis 11:1-9

11 Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ²And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³And they said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.' And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.' ⁵The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. ⁶And the Lord said, 'Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹Therefore it was called Babel,

because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

John 3:25-35

²⁵Now a discussion about purification arose between John's disciples and a Jew. ²⁶They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him.' ²⁷John answered, 'No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven. ²⁸You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, "I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." ²⁹He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. ³⁰He must increase, but I must decrease.'

³¹The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks about earthly things. The one who comes from heaven is above all. ³²He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony. ³³Whoever has accepted his testimony has certified this, that God is true. ³⁴He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure. ³⁵The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands.

Reflection by Jeremy Morris

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Here are some of the closing words of our Gospel reading, put in the mouth of the Baptist, who is, however, speaking about Jesus: "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure." Anyone who is familiar with the language of the Gospel of John, and in particular who thinks forward to the great sequence of sayings Jesus utters on the night before his arrest in Jerusalem, will instantly recognize that this very stylized way of speaking about Jesus's relationship with God puts the Baptist immediately right alongside Jesus himself, as the forerunner of the Christ, who shares the same understanding of who Jesus is as Jesus himself. Even though our Gospel reading says that the Baptist

recognized that he must decrease, while Jesus increased, there is an absolute unity of purpose between the two. We wouldn't expect anything less, given the very strong emphasis on unity in love which we find running through John's Gospel. The Baptist here goes on to say "The Father loves the Son and has placed all things in his hands."

How different that vision of unity of purpose and love is from the tower of Babel! It is after the flood, and the descendants of the children of Noah are to repopulate the earth. Yet, in disobedience to God, they decided to settle in one place – seemingly the place that will become the plain of Babylon – and build a city with a great tower reaching up to rival God himself. God will have none of it, scatters them, and mixes up their speech, so that in future they could do no such thing. There is no unity of purpose and love between God and his people here.

It is a wonderful story, but like much of Genesis, we miss the point if we ask ourselves questions like 'What is the historical accuracy of this account?' Perhaps even more than the story of the flood itself, the truth to which the story of the tower of Babel is pointing lies well beyond any question of literal or historical fact. It is a myth, perhaps, but one based in an acute perception of the basis of human failure and division.

Language does of course divide us. There are as many languages as there are human cultures. And so often they speak past each other. We import words from one language into our own when we simply don't have the equivalent in English, and then they become as if they were ours – pyjamas, verandah, pizza, pasta, café – you can think of many other examples. Some words express a thought that's simply untranslatable in English without many words – schadenfreude, for instance. Even using the same language, two different cultures often mean quite different things by the same word. Don't we often say of America and Britain, two nations divided by a common language? It's said that, during the Korean war, at the battle of the Imjin River, when the Gloucester Regiment was hemmed down by thousands of enemy

soldiers and suffering terrible casualties, their commander managed to radio through to his superior, an American, to say 'Sir, things are getting a bit sticky here'. To an English sensibility, that meant it was getting impossible to hang on, classic understatement; the American, however, disastrously took it as a sign that it wasn't too bad, and they could manage. Even in the same language, misunderstanding can be catastrophic.

But although I suspect that this simple fact of linguistic difference was the starting point for the ancient Israelite story of Babel, it isn't what the story is really about. There's a deeper truth here. Division amongst human beings is the consequence of sin, and sin is rebellion against God. The whole history of Israel could be read as a baleful reflection on that truth. God made human beings in his own image, and yet they turn away from his intentions for them. Time and again he offers life and prosperity, even through times of great adversity, and yet they fail to recognize what they owe him. He gives law and society and true worship, and yet they let him down at every stage. This rebellion against God is ultimately a rebellion against love and the service of others, in human terms. It is a selfish, self-assertive will to power that is symbolized in that extraordinary image of a futile tower trying to reach the very heavens.

If the Hebrew scriptures are then, in summary, a tragedy, a tale of a great falling away from God's will, both for humanity as a whole, and for the people of Israel, the Gospels are a narrative of God's response, God's redemption, perhaps even God's re-creation, of his original vision of human belonging with him. And that happens, of course, through the coming of Christ, the incarnation of the Son of God in the world of space and time. If you really want to understand the relationship between these two passages of Scripture, the tower of Babel, and the Baptist's witness to the unity of Jesus with the Father, you could hardly do better than go to Paul: "For since by man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in

Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.” (1 Corinthians 15.21-2)

John the Baptist offers us a model of a counter-response to the usual human jostling for power and authority. He compares himself to the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and rejoices at the bridegroom’s voice. He recognizes his mission is falling into the shadows: Jesus must increase, but John must decrease. The Baptist’s obedience and humility here is again a striking contrast to the people of Babel. He doesn’t reach for the heavens. He has no need. The heavens have come down to him, and to all of us. Jesus, the one who is above all, is the one who comes from heaven. In him, not through our own unaided efforts, not through our restless competition and attempts to beat others in life, in him are we brought into the presence of God.

For he has, the Baptist reminds us, the Spirit of God without measure. There’s a sort of equation here. God came to share our life in the incarnation of his Son, Jesus the Christ. And since we are redeemed by him, by his death and resurrection, we are brought back to God. Jesus has the Spirit of God without measure. And he shares that Spirit with us, without measure, without limit. The Orthodox, the Eastern Church, talk of this equation as ‘deification’ – that is to say, that in Christ we are ourselves raised to the divine life. I’m a bit uncomfortable with that term, but you know what it’s saying. In faith, as members of Christ’s body, the Church, there is no separation from God. God shares his life with us. We might sometimes wonder what difference that makes to us, when we are struggling under the weight of anxiety, illness, fear, prejudice, loneliness, loss, and all the other many forms in which human frailty afflicts us. But our unity with Christ does not take us out of this world’s struggles, but through them. It binds us together with him, and in him with our fellow human beings. As the Spirit of God mobilizes us in faith, in prayer, in communion, in worship, in compassion and active care, we can remake the world in God’s image, tear down the human will to power, put back love at the centre of social life. For we have the Spirit of God without measure, in

Christ and through Christ. And so to him be all might, majesty, dominion and power, now and for ever. Amen.

Affirmation of Faith

We say together in faith

**Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.**

We believe in God the Father,
who created all things:
**for by his will they were created
and have their being.**

We believe in God the Son,
who was slain:
**for with his blood,
he purchased us for God,
from every tribe and language,
from every people and nation.**

We believe in God the Holy Spirit:
**the Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'
Even so come, Lord Jesus! Amen.**

cf Revelation 4.8, 11; 5.9; 22.17, 20

Prayers of Intercession led by John Crang

As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you; now and forever.

Almighty God, in Christ you make all things new: transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your heavenly glory.
Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We pray for the renewal of the Church throughout the world, in faith, love and service. May we be ever reminded of your love that unites us despite our differences and foibles. We pray for Stephen and Dagmar, our bishops, and all who are looking to understand how our communities flourish as we move into the future. We give thanks for the gift of your word, the grace of the sacraments and the fellowship of your people. By your Spirit, day-by-day, enliven and enrich our understanding of the treasure contained in our ordinary mortal vessels. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Gracious God, we pray for peace, justice and reconciliation throughout the world. Govern the hearts and minds of those in authority, and bring the families of the nations, divided and torn apart by the ravages of fear and greed, to be subject to your just and gentle rule. In those areas of tension and conflicts we pray for the honouring of human rights and for the relief of the oppressed. We pray for those suffering from religious discrimination and persecution that we may all recognise our fraternity and give thanks for all that is gracious in the lives of men, women and children.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We pray for our local communities and for all people in their daily life and work. We pray for the young and the elderly, for families, and all who are alone. We give thanks for human skill and creativity and all that reveals your loveliness.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We pray for those who are in need; for the sick, sorrowful and bereaved. We pray for all who bring comfort, care and healing. We give thanks for human love and friendship and for all that enriches our daily lives.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

We remember all those who have died in the peace of Christ, both those who have confessed the faith and those whose faith is known to you alone. Grant us with them a share in your eternal kingdom.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Let us commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray, to the mercy and protection of God.

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

Collect

Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things,
now and forever. **Amen**

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

Hymn – Thou whose almighty word

I Thou whose almighty word
 chaos and darkness heard,
 and took their flight;

hear us, we humbly pray,
and where the Gospel-day
sheds not its glorious ray,
let there be light.

2 Thou, who didst come to bring
on thy redeeming wing
healing and sight,
health to the sick in mind,
sight to the inly blind,
O now to all mankind
let there be light.

3 Spirit of truth and love,
life-giving, holy Dove,
speed forth thy flight;
move o'er the water's face,
bearing the lamp of grace,
and in earth's darkest place
let there be light.

4 Blessed and holy Three,
glorious Trinity,
Wisdom, Love, Might;
boundless as ocean's tide
rolling in fullest pride,
through the world far and wide
let there be light.

John Marriott (1780-1825), Thomas Raffles (1788-1863)

Conclusion

The Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of the living God,
teach us to walk in his way more trustfully,
to accept his truth more faithfully,
and to share his life more lovingly;
that by the power of the Holy Spirit

we may come as one family to the kingdom of the Father,
and the blessing of God the Father,
God the Son and God the Holy Spirit
Be with us all, now and evermore. **Amen**

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