

Vocations Sunday 2024

Call to Worship

Loving parent God, you call us to worship,
To gather together in story and song.

Arriving early in anxiety,
you call us.

Arriving late in a panic,
you call us.

Needing personal space,
you call us.

Needing contact and connection,
you call us.

Seeking silence from the world,
you call us.

Seeking to talk at length of our loves and losses,
you call us.

Craving predictability and routine,
you call us.

Craving difference and change,
you call us.

With different minds and different hearts,
different bodies and different lives
you call us in your love to be one.

We come. Amen.

Singing the Faith (StF) 330 Joy to the World the Lord is come

Although often sung at Christmas this hymn was written by Isaac Watts while reflecting on Psalm 98 – one of our lectionary readings. Sometimes it is good to shift our perspective and change our thinking as it opens up new meaning for us in our worship.

Opening Prayers

Based on Psalm 98

God of love, creator of all,
the wonders of creation surround us and astound us,
spoken into being with a word poured out in love.
Creation still vibrates with that word, the song of old,
Our myriad voices, discordant, yet harmonious in a new song of praise!

Your never-ending, never-failing love,
reaches out as strong arms;
lifting the fallen, defending the weak, binding the broken,
saving us while we were in peril,
and showing all people your righteousness.

The music within us, rises across the earth,
different notes, chords, and melodies,
varied songs and words, all singing of love and devotion.
Striking, piping, playing anything at hand;
all to praise our God of Love.

Creation joins our song,
waves crash like cymbals,
whale song fills the sea like organ music.
The slap and bubble of river water keeps the rhythm
as the very hills and mountains ring with joy,
as you, Lord, dance through your creation,
and take your people's hand:
To govern your kingdom and lead us in your dance.

Confession

For the times when our love has not reflected your own,
Lord, forgive us.

For the times when our love has been too narrow,
Lord, forgive us.

For the times when we give our love a price,
Lord, forgive us.

For the times when we have withdrawn our love,
Lord, forgive us.

For the times when we confuse duty with love,
Lord, forgive us.

In the name of your Son,
who gave his life as a gift of love,
to bring us home while we were still far off,
who rose from death,
that we might also be raised and be united in you,
we pray.

Amen.

Lord's Prayer

StF 363 My Jesus, my Saviour

Reading

1 John 5:1-9

All Age Talk

There is a game as old as the hills themselves, a game which has been played in every youth group, uniformed organisation and school in all likelihood.

The game is a simple one, so simple it feels as if it should be impossible to get it wrong or get 'out' as you play. The instructions are clear, if you follow the instructions then you should have no problem.

The trouble is, as the game progresses, as the young people get more and more excited about playing, the more likely it is that mistakes are made. The only reason you make a mistake in this game is by failing to pay attention, by ignoring the instructions and acting before you think.

Whether the person leading is calling out the instructions or signing them or if they flash up on a projector screen, all you have to do is follow them.

If, and only if, the instruction begins with “Simon says...”.

It sounds so easy, doesn't it?

But it is easy to get carried away, to think you heard or saw “Simon says...” and to follow the next command only to find that you are one of only a few patting your head and rubbing your tummy.

There are times when it seems like Christianity is a big game of ‘Jesus says...’, rather than ‘Simon says...’. Everyone is so keen to start doing what they think that they are commanded to do that sometimes they end up doing something which was not what Jesus asked at all.

Maybe they are being judgmental because they think that some people should not be part of Jesus' family. Perhaps they are being greedy, holding on to money which they think should be theirs because God has blessed them. Perhaps they think that God only wants them to come to church on a Sunday and the rest of their time is for them to use as they want.

Do you know how you win at ‘Simon says...’? You pay attention, you wait and you think about the instruction. Following what Jesus says is the same: You pay attention to the command, wait a moment, think about it. Did Jesus say it?

Just as in the game of ‘Simon says...’, if Jesus didn't say it then don't do it. If Jesus did say to do it though, what do you think that you need to do? That's right, *do it!*

Jesus' commands are easy to recognise because they all sound the same. They all sound like love.

In the reading we are about to hear Jesus said, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love ... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”

We need to listen for the sound of love in the command.

Reading

John 15:9-17

StF 293 All heaven declares

Reflection

When we read this passage we can think, “Where on earth do I start? We have to keep all Christ’s commands or we are out? I thought that salvation was through faith not works?”

Is that what Jesus was saying?

Perhaps this was Jesus’ way of asking, “Have you all been paying attention? Do you understand what this means? I’m going soon and I need to know that you get it.” Perhaps it was about more than following rules, perhaps it was a bit more about the *why* we do what we do.

Jesus was telling his friends this *after* they had shared a meal which represented the Passover, an act of remembrance of Jewish history when God – through Moses – led the Israelites out of slavery and into freedom.

Jesus took that retelling and read new context into it, telling his friends how his coming sacrifice would lead the world out of slavery and into freedom. This is the context into which the instruction to obey Christ’s commands comes.

After the Israelites escaped Egypt they received commandments from God, ten of them, telling them how to live in their new freedom.

So, after Jesus leads us by his sacrifice into freedom, we too are given commandments.

When Jesus is telling his friends that if they love him and God then they will keep his and his father’s commands, it was an instruction of how to live in the freedom of the kingdom of God. You love Jesus? Love God? Great, then do as they command.

There are 613 Jewish commandments, the *Mitzvot*. Was Jesus telling them that the only way to remain in his love was to keep all 613 commandments?

What a final message to his friends that would be. What a weight on their shoulders as they saw him pick up his cross and head up that hill. What a weight on our shoulders if we are to follow him.

The answer to this lies in the letter from John, which is the first reading set for today. Did you catch it? In 1 John 5, verse 3 John writes, “For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are **not burdensome**.”

In the Disney movie *Encanto*, there is a character called Luisa. She is immensely strong and, along with her magical family, she helps her village. The trouble is that, being strong, she tries to carry the weight of the world on her shoulders, and in her song, (because it is Disney, of course she has a song!) the cracks begin to show.

She talks, or rather sings, of how under the surface, the pressure of trying to be all things to all people, keeping everyone safe and happy, is weighing her down to the point that she is going to break. She questions if she has what it takes to do the job of carrying it all.

Jesus knew a thing or two about carrying burdens. He told people that if they wanted to be his disciple, they needed to pick up their cross and follow him – this sounds like a massive burden, doesn't it? But what if Jesus meant this to be freeing rather than burdensome? In our Gospel reading Jesus says that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends,” so maybe this is more about our living than dying, giving your living self in love.

Elsewhere when Jesus talks about carrying burdens, he talks more about them being light. When he sends his disciples out on mission, he tells them not to carry a load of stuff with them, just themselves.

Another time, when teaching those around him, Jesus said:

“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ... For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

The **yoke** meant something to those listening to Jesus. Although a yoke was known as an agricultural instrument, pulled by animals like oxen in ploughing fields, it was a symbol of a burden, and sometimes oppression. God had warned the Jewish people that they would end up with a **yoke of iron**, in slavery to their enemies, if they didn't stick with God in joy and gladness. Sometimes it was a burden of duty and responsibility, as is the yoke of the Jewish law.

It was the tradition; it was the norm.

Every Rabbi had their own **yoke**, and it was that teacher's interpretation of the law (the Ten Commandments and the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy). It was a yoke of service to

the law and how they thought you should follow it, that they placed on their disciples. Their teachings often would emphasise all the duties and sacrifice the law demanded and how difficult it was.

Jesus said this of the teachers who made following God harder:

“The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it, but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others, but **they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them**. They do all their deeds to be seen by others, for they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long. They love to have the place of honour at banquets and the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to have people call them rabbi” (Matthew 23:2-7).

Those leaders would take the law and add pages of supplements about how you should keep it and what it all meant. So, the Ten Commandments became hundreds.

One, then 1a, 1b, 1c and so on... coupled with every command that could be found in the Hebrew Bible.

Not for Jesus though. When someone asked him which were the most important commandments, he took all the law and the commandments and instead of piling on extra instruction he said:

“You shall **love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall **love your neighbour as yourself**.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 22:37-40).

That’s it, not the 613 laws of Moses plus all the commentary. Two commandments: Love God, love others and the rest will follow.

This is the **easy yoke** of Jesus, the cross-beam he would have us pick up, lay across our shoulders and carry.

Jesus was telling people that if you spend your lives working your socks off trying to keep the letter of the law, you will wear yourselves out and never manage to keep it. What Jesus offered was a different yoke, an easy yoke.

Let me teach you a new quick and easy Greek word that you can use to impress your friends and wow at parties. Where it reads ‘easy’, the greek word is *chrestos*, which has

many meanings like good, kind and easy, but in relation to a yoke it meant 'fitting'. An ill-fitting yoke rubs and chafes: you can imagine how this would be more distracting than helpful, constantly needing to shift your position to keep it comfortable. Jesus' commands about how to live would fit people's lives, they would not chafe or rub or bruise, they would enable them to do what they were called to without being weighed down, and like a yoke on an ox they would guide the believer the right way.

These are the commands then which Jesus would have us keep to remain in God, in the kingdom, in our freedom. *Love*: love God, love humanity.

The words of our Gospel reading were recorded by John. These are the words of Jesus, it is true, but it was John who recorded them, and he is clear that he didn't write every word of Jesus. At the end of the Gospel he writes:

"But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

Paper was an expensive thing and writing by hand took time. So why did John repeat what had already been clearly said? It is thought that John the Apostle wrote this book, so he was there to hear the words of Jesus first-hand. In his Gospel, the word 'love' appears 57 times, more than Matthew, Mark and Luke combined and then a further 46 times in the first Epistle of John.

Love is the central theme running through his writing. According to the theologian William Barclay, "'God loves Christ, Christ loves God, God loves humanity, and Christians love God through their love for Christ'. Christians are bound together through their mutual love, which is a reflection of their love for Christ."

After spending all that time following Jesus around, John was left with one defining message which he thought the whole Church needed to take to heart, to wear as a badge, a banner under which to march: **love**.

Today is Vocations Sunday, it is a time in our Church calendar when we think about calling.

We can get quite caught up in our heads about calling and vocation and ministry, as if they are reserved for the special select few who will go on to slide a white strip of plastic through their collar and step out into the world representing the Church and speaking for God.

This is simply not true. Every person who gives their lives to God, accepts Jesus into their heart and becomes a citizen of God's kingdom, has a calling. A calling guided by our following of Christ's command to love.

Love is the uniform we wear as we step into the world following our calling.

A uniform has a purpose. If you are a Scout or a Guide you wear a uniform; school children wear uniforms; police officers, soldiers and road maintenance people, they all wear a uniform.

The uniform serves several purposes. It tells you that you belong to something, it tells teammates that you belong with them, it tells others who you belong to and what your values are, and it can protect you while you do what you are called to do.

We wear a uniform of love, and in our own individual calling we represent the Church and we speak of God.

Jesus wanted to be sure that the world would be in no doubt who his followers were.

Not by their riches – for they were mainly poor fishermen, women, and unemployed tax collectors. Not by their righteousness – they would continue to get things wrong, to make mistakes. Not by their sinlessness – for only Jesus was without sin. Not by their passing judgment on others, being exclusive or keeping people out. Not by unparalleled holiness or purity.

No, they would be known as his by the love they shared and the love they show. By being the embodiment of the two greatest commandments and the command he gave them. Love the Lord your God with everything that you have – mind, body, soul and spirit – and love your neighbour as you should love yourself. Love one another as I have loved you. **Love.**

Love extravagantly like the prodigal father greeting his lost son.

Love with such impartial extravagance like the Good Samaritan caring for one who would hate or scorn them.

Love with the dedication to our call that Philip the deacon did; telling the official from Ethiopia, a eunuch, a foreigner, of the love of God for them.

This is the love we are called to share!

Love with the reckless abandon that Jesus showed in loving others; prostitutes, sinners, tax collectors, foreigners and those of other faiths, not judging or excluding but loving and including.

To love like this is costly, it is dangerous, it will make enemies among the religious as it did for Jesus. It will shame others who cannot bring themselves to love like this.

But, siblings, what choice do we have? Jesus said "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Love unconditionally like God loves. Love, because God first loved us.

StF 503 Love divine, all loves excelling

Prayers

Jesus Christ, our brother, our friend.

Love of God incarnate, love of God walking with us, love of God talking with us.

Personification of love, in the presence of your friends, knowing that you were going to make the ultimate sacrifice of love in giving your life, knowing that you were returning to your Father, you handed on your mission of love.

You asked them, and us, to reveal you to others, to show that we belong to you.

You prayed that you would be revealed through the actions of people who followed you: Not preaching in moral superiority, not in judgement, not in condemning others nor even in acts of piety and holiness.

Simply through our love.

Holy Spirit within us,

in and through our love you reveal Jesus, reveal the Father.

As people made in the image of God, we are called to love as Christ loved; seeing the image of God in others and revealing God in the world.

We pray that your love may be shown in the world, Lord, and that we may take up our calling to be there, showing the love of Christ to all, loving the way that Jesus loved.

God of love, love around us, who created us in love, through love and for love, to receive your Spirit, to follow your Son and to serve the world in love. You have a plan, a mission, and a calling for each of us.

Direct our lives, loving God we pray, that through your love creation may be restored to you.

Amen.

In the presence of the broken and the downtrodden, the powerless:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both binds the broken but confronts the powers which break people.

In the presence of those who do not know from where their next meal will come:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both feeds the hungry and challenges the greed of those who would withhold blessing.

In the presence of those of us whose lives are tarnished by choices made:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both washes the dirty feet of walking in the world but also seeks to clean the grime from creation as we travel.

In the presence of the isolated and the lonely, the marginalised and oppressed:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both seeks to find the lost and bulldozes the walls which would keep people outside.

In the presence of those caught at crossroads with a damaged map and broken compass:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both leads the way and sits to wait with those afraid to move.

In the presence of those who are silenced and those straining their senses to learn of hope:

Let your name be known and let your love be shown.

Love which both shouts of God to the world and listens to the stories of God from those still seeking.

Amen.

Meditation

Love can be many things, but true love bears the echo of the love of Jesus.

What does such love sound like?

Is it the song that pulls at your heart?

What does love sound like?

Is it the sound of a lover's sigh?

What does love sound like?

Does it sound like the close friend come to call?

What does love sound like?

Is it the sound of chiming chapel bells after a year of silence?

What does love sound like?

Is it the sweet tones of the birds as they sing?

What does love sound like?

Is it the soft still soothing sound of a parent comforting their child?

Is that what love sounds like?

Or is it just possibly the sound of a dying man's last breath, "It is finished."

The Love we are called to show, to anyone and everyone, is the love of Jesus, the love of God.

The love that God demonstrated to us, that while we were yet far off, Christ died to save us.

In the name of the Son of the God of love we pray.

Amen.

StF 409 Let us build a house where love can dwell

Blessing Prayer

Based on Jude 24-25

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever.

Now, disciples of Jesus Christ, let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord. All in the name of Christ.

Amen.

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