

THE SUNDAY SUPPLEMENT

17th May 2020 – Sixth Sunday of Easter

Welcome to this week's *Sunday Supplement*. For those who are able, a service of Holy Communion is available on our YouTube channel from 7am Sunday.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMSD6j4ngi9rCe7kzY66Xfw>

Following Bishop James' permission for clergy to enter church buildings to record services, this week's worship was filmed at Holy Trinity, Seathwaite. Thank you to Gail Batten for making sure that the church was ready for the service, and for her care of the building more generally. Thanks to Chris Dean for continuing to provide recording equipment; to Chris Dean and Stuart Colvin for media; and to our intercessor and readers for the week: Linda Dean, Belinda McWilliam and Stuart Colvin.

Over the coming weeks, I will be filming services all round the parishes. There will almost certainly be time for each of our churches to play a role before the lockdown ends and normal Sunday worship resumes. If you would like to contribute to our recorded services by intercessing or reading, I would be most grateful. Please get in touch. It's surprisingly easy and I can provide you with some technical help if required.

SEATHWAITE CHURCH

I'm conscious that many of our readers and viewers are from outside the parishes and do not know all of our churches. I've included a brief introduction to Holy Trinity in this week's service, noting in passing its connection with William Wordsworth.

The first Seathwaite chapel was built in the 16th century. By 1870 it was too dilapidated to restore and the present building was erected to a design by the well-known North West firm of ecclesiastical architects, Sharpe, Paley & Austin.

The church is notable for its connection with the Revd Robert Walker. Walker was the youngest child of Nicholas Walker, a yeoman farmer, and his wife Elizabeth. He was born at Undercrag, Seathwaite, in 1709. Brought up a scholar, he became a school teacher and then curate in his native Seathwaite. He was the incumbent from 1736 until his death in 1802 at the age of 92. He was a greatly admired minister and also

served as a scrivener to local people who could not write; he assisted in shearing the flocks, spinning wool and was renowned for his generosity. Robert was later immortalised as "Wonderful Walker" by Wordsworth, in his poem "The Excursion" and in Duddon Sonnet No. XVIII (Seathwaite).

A large stone by the church porch, now inset with a sundial, is reputed to be the stone one used by Walker when clipping sheep at Gatescale, near Wrynose.

READINGS & COLLECT

Acts 17:22-31
Psalm 66:7-end
1 Peter 3:13-end
John 14:15-21

*God our redeemer,
you have delivered us from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death he has recalled us to life,
so by his continual presence in us he may raise us
to eternal joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.*

Amen.

SUNDAY MESSAGE

Also available as the sermon in our video service.

There's so much richness in our scripture today that it's hard to know what best to highlight in the short space of a single sermon. I want to focus primarily, but not exclusively, on Paul's sermon in Athens, in the reading from Acts. From that, I want to pick up what it suggests about two themes: idolatry and evangelism.

The Areopagus is a prominent outcrop of rock in Athens. In ancient times, it was the seat of a court which was convened to try the most important cases, such as murder, wounding, arson and religious matters. Its name means the 'great rock of Ares'. Ares, the Greek god of war, was supposed to have been tried there for the murder of a son of Poseidon, god of the sea. Paul's sermon is therefore symbolically situated in

a place suitable for important questions, for trying the identity of God, for discussion of religion. Whatever the substance of what he says, we are plainly shown that Paul is here to convince intelligent people of weighty matters, to evangelise, to spread the Gospel. Paul is modelling what we should be doing.

What Paul actually talks about is the pagan practice of worshipping idols: statues or images of gods made of stone or precious metal. The true God, says Paul, is not visible in this way. The one true deity does not resemble, and is not made of, material things by the “*art and imagination of mortals*”, nor can He be found in “*shrines made by human hands*.”

When did you first encounter the prohibition of idols? For me it was at Primary School in the story of the Exodus, and the golden calf, which the Israelites make while Moses is on the mountain. And I heard it in the Ten Commandments (for which see the video). And I have to say that it didn't mean much to me. I had no plans to make or worship a graven image when I was six, and I haven't seriously encountered the temptation since. No-one pointed out to me that idolatry doesn't necessarily involve worshipping statues.

Paul is undoubtedly telling the Athenians that their statues are wrong, that most of what they worship in their shrines is false. But like the Old Testament prohibition of idols, what he is also getting at is *idolatry*, the worship of anything which is of earthly, rather than divine, origin. And that is a message that speaks to us, even though we don't anymore repose confidence in *idols*, in statues or images.

We are all in some way worshippers at the altar of mortal arts. We are all to some degree like the Rich Young Ruler, told by Jesus that he must sell all his possessions, and yet reluctant to do so. Identifying the false god in a shrine is quite easy, but other false gods are more difficult for us to identify, or admit to ourselves. What are the things that, in reality, we hold sacred? They might be items of property; standards of living; interests, hobbies and pastimes; political opinions; positions we hold; they might be aspects of what we think, or value, about ourselves.

It's very easy to say: “there's nothing I couldn't do without, nothing I couldn't change, if I had to.” The coronavirus emergency has taught us that we can make fundamental changes to our lives when we have to. But these are not changes that we choose to make. Are we prepared to *choose* to give things up for the sake of others, for the sake of the world, for the sake of Christ? Zaccheus, when he encountered Jesus, chose freely to give up half of what he had. It's not so clear that the

Rich Young Ruler was prepared to follow Jesus. There are things that we hold as sacred as the Rich Young Ruler did. It's not easy to know what they are and it's even more difficult to sacrifice them voluntarily in order to be the different and better people that God calls us to be.

This hard lesson doesn't seem immediately obvious in Paul's sermon. Part of the reason for this is that Paul, perhaps uncharacteristically, is so polite about it. He gives credit where it is due, just as we should. Paul begins by complimenting the Athenians on being a very religious people. That might not be an unalloyed compliment today, but it would have been well received in the ancient world. Paul's evidence for the religiosity of the Athenians is that, on his walk round their city, he has encountered an altar dedicated to an unknown god. What he found was that the Athenians, believing in many gods of their own, and conscious that the nations and races around them had their own deities, sought to have every god acknowledged in their city. Perhaps they did so out of self-interest, but at least they were not close-minded. It may be that they acknowledged the possibility of another God out of humility. Paul tells them that their instincts are right: there is another God, the only God.

The Athenians in their humility and in their seeking after the divine, are already some way toward worshipping the true God. Here we pick up again the point that I made last week, when I talked about the hope of universal salvation that we ought to entertain, and for which we should trust in God's mercy and justice. Those who have not known Jesus Christ, even those who have not accepted him, should not be treated by us as beyond the pale. Judgment in this matter, as in others, is not for us. We do not know how far others have unknowingly preserved in their hearts some altar, some dedication to the unknown God. As I said last week, this goes also for those who have died without apparently professing the faith of Christ. Peter talks here in today's second reading of what is known as the ‘harrowing of hell’ – “*Christ was put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison*”. We cannot know what lies beyond death except that there is God, who is infinite love, mercy, justice and compassion. To those sublime virtues we can safely entrust the fates of those we love, who have gone before us.

Paul's style of evangelism in Athens proceeds in just the way indicated in First Peter, which tells us to speak our mind, to justify our faith, with gentleness and reverence.

I can confirm from experience that having an argument with non-believers is not helpful or effective evangelism. If our relationship with a questioner ceases to be loving, then it ceases to be (or to model successfully) what Christ demanded of all relationships with our neighbours. It becomes self-defeating.

Christ calls us to be so visibly and positively changed by our faith that others are intrigued by it. So, when we are speaking to others about matters of faith, we ought not to be cross or evasive; we should not conceal parts of what we believe or don't believe, or the things we don't understand. We should be humble, and open to their views, because God made them too. We should certainly speak personally, from the heart, about why we have faith. That experience can be the most effective evangelism. But we should also have reasons: we should have thought about faith, as well as living it.

After this service, ponder that line from Peter's letter, "always be ready to make your defence [or to give a reason] to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you." That line is of the first importance for us as Christians today. When people touch upon faith, upon divinity, upon the metaphysical – or even when they criticise faith – how will we answer? In the past, apologetics, the discipline of defending faith against critics, was considered important. We tend now to confine it to academia and to debates with militant atheists. Apologetics is important for all of us, however. Just as the early church faced accusations that it was atheistic, that it worshipped evil spirits, that it engaged in human sacrifice and that it sought to overthrow the government – Christianity today faces misconceptions. We are told that Christians dismiss science (sadly some do indeed ignore the book of creation in this way); that Christianity has been and will always be a source of division, violence and abuse; that Christianity has no answers to questions like, "why is there suffering in the world?". These are things about which it is our duty to think, because it is our duty to speak of our faith and make new disciples, and it is our duty to give reasons for the hope that is in us.

We should be in a constant cycle of seeking to be purified, while at the same time drawing others into the good news of faith. We don't have to be perfect, or have perfect answers, before we go out into the world to engage with it. Indeed, our own continuing journey is part of what we will speak about, part of what will make us engaging to listeners. This week's Epistle and Gospel reveal how we are to recognise and dethrone the false Gods in our lives. We must be eager to do what is good, keeping Christ's commandments and holding on to Christ as Lord, even when we are

maligned for it. In this life, we must open ourselves to the Spirit, aiming for a relationship so close that it can truly be said that the Spirit of Christ dwells within us. For the next life, we must trust in the Lord, that our baptism into Christ will save us from our own shortcomings.

NOTICES

If you need help that you can't get elsewhere, no matter what your age or circumstances, you can email duddoncommunity@outlook.com In Kirkby, you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Linda Dean (01229) 889630. In Broughton and the valleys you can phone Stephen Tudway (01229) 715259 or Selwyn Wright (01229) 716797.

CLOSING PRAYER

*God our Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ gives the water of eternal life:
may we thirst for you,
the spring of life and source of goodness,
through him who is alive and reigns, now and for ever.
Amen.*

FOODBANK

In accordance with requests from the Foodbank, an entirely non-food aspect to our purchasing this week:



AN ACT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

You may wish to set aside a space for prayer in front of a cross and/or candle, in a part of the house which is calm and comfortable and perhaps decorated for Easter.

The Act of Spiritual Communion is best used at the time of normal church services, or as a personal response after listening to a broadcast or livestreamed service.

Guidance appears in italics. You may wish to say aloud the words in bold type.

Introduction

Begin by making the sign of the cross and thinking of those who might otherwise be sitting around you in church.



**In the name of the Father,
And of the Son,
And of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.**

Reflection

The Spirit of the Lord fills the world and knows our every word and deed. Let us open ourselves to the Lord and confess our sins in penitence and faith.

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
we have sinned against you,
through our own fault,
in thought, and word, and deed,
and in what we have left undone.
We are heartily sorry,
and repent of all our sins.
For your Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,
forgive us all that is past;
and grant that we may serve you
in newness of life
to the glory of your name.
Amen.**

*May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins,
and bring us to everlasting life, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

The Word of God

Read one or more passages of scripture, perhaps the readings set for the day. Today's readings can be found listed earlier in this Sunday Supplement. You may wish to read the sermon.

Prayer

Begin with the Collect. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to the needs of the world, our community, family and friends and to the prayers you ought to offer for them.

Spend time in silence to reflect on the issues raised in the readings or the sermon and apply them to your own life.

End with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven... or

Our Father in heaven...

Prayer for Communion

This prayer may also be used at the appropriate point while watching a live or recorded service of Holy Communion.

**Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.**

(After the prayer of St Richard of Chichester)

Closing prayers

**Father of all, you have given us your Son to be
the Saviour of the world. Welcome us your
children into your kingdom to enjoy your
presence now and for ever.**

Jesus said, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.'

**The Lord bless us, and preserve us from all evil,
and keep us in eternal life. Amen.**