

Welcome

Hello and welcome to our Sunday service, here from my home. My name is Charmaine and I am a member of Haverhill Methodist Church in the UK.

Before we begin our service I would like to share with you some exciting news from our church. This year we will be having a presence on FB throughout Advent. Each day there will be a short film talking about something to do with the run-up to Christmas and it has been designed mainly for people not familiar with the Christmas story, or with church for that matter. Each day there is a different presenter from our church. You will be able to see these on our FB Community Page and also on the various Haverhill Community FB pages. It's a really exciting development into social media and we're looking forward to seeing how that develops.

It's been really great to hear this week of several vaccines against covid19 coming very soon, and there will be more for sure. It really does lift our spirits that at last, after a very difficult year, a solution will soon be here. We still have to be vigilant and also patient. I'm so grateful to the scientific world who have worked like crazy to build an effective vaccine so quickly and I thank God for his gift to us of clever and willing minds. I thank Him personally for leading me in the way of patience! Meanwhile life remains tough for many and that may get harder before it gets better. If that includes you I pray for the Lord to bless you and keep you.

The doors to our church building must remain closed for the time being but be reassured the church of people are just as much at work, out in the community where they need to be.

Call to worship

Let's pray,

We have been called into the pastures of God,
where there is nurture, a place to rest,
safety, and kindness among all.

Let us draw near, in the goodness of God,
to be with each other,

and to praise the shepherd who has gathered us here. Amen.

Here are the words of David in Psalm 145 v 1-13

- ¹ I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name for ever and ever.
- ² Every day I will praise you
and extol your name for ever and ever.
- ⁹ The LORD is good to all;
he has compassion on all he has made.
- ¹⁰ All your works praise you, LORD;
your faithful people extol you.
- ¹¹ They tell of the glory of your kingdom
and speak of your might,
- ¹² so that all people may know of your mighty acts
and the glorious splendour of your kingdom.
- ¹³ Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.
- The LORD is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does. Amen

Song 1 Majesty – Lauren Daigle
<https://youtu.be/T8z58JjhCKo>

Majesty, Worship His Majesty
Unto Jesus Be Glory Honour And Praise
Majesty, Kingdom, Authority
Flows From His Throne
Unto His Own
His Anthem Raise

So Exalt, Lift Upon High
The Name Of Jesus
Magnify Come Glorify
Christ, Jesus The King

Majesty, Worship His Majesty
Jesus Who Died, Now Glorified
King Of All Kings.
Jesus Who Died, Now Glorified
King Of All Kings.

Reading for today Mathew 25.31-46

The sheep and the goats

³¹ 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³ He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

³⁴ 'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

³⁷ 'Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you ill or in prison and go to visit you?"

⁴⁰ 'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

⁴¹ 'Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴² For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was ill and in prison and you did not look after me."

⁴⁴ 'They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or ill or in prison, and did not help you?"

⁴⁵ 'He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

⁴⁶ 'Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'

Amen

Prayers for others/ Intercessions

Lord we turn our thoughts to other people, those we know and those we don't. The world this year has been a harsh place to live and we pray for any who are suffering with covid 19 and the complications of the disease. There have been so many casualties beyond the infection itself and we ask for your blessing upon those left lonely and isolated, and for those who have been unable to receive important treatment for other illnesses, especially cancer.

We give heartfelt thanks for the scientific and medical professionals who have worked above and beyond, to treat our sick and dying and for those instrumental in the developments of vaccines. We ask that those responsible for the distribution of the vaccine ensure that the poorest nations receive equal access.

We pray for decision makers, strategists and policy makers that they are given your wisdom when navigating through this covid-era.

We want to pray that improvements to essential global affairs, though paused this year, are able to be re-scheduled as soon as possible. Our use of plastics has understandably shot up, industry has been changed and the environmental and climate change discussions were paused. We pray now that these can be tackled in a fruitful and rapid way.

We pray silently for those near to us who need your love.....

Thank you Lord for listening to us at all times and for reassuring us that you always keep us safe and loved.

Amen

Instead of saying the Lord's Prayer together this week we can watch a sung performance.

Sung Lord's Prayer Andrea Bocelli and the Tabernacle Choir

<https://youtu.be/bmJgbpJQHYU> <https://youtu.be/u8jlmIjg4UY>

Two songs

Take this moment – John Bell

<https://youtu.be/NbZ6gGG0V-o>

Take this moment, sign and space;
Take my friends around;
Here among us make the place
Where your love is found.

Take the time to call my name,
Take the time to mend
Who I am and what I've been,
All I've failed to tend.

Take the tiredness of my days,
Take my past regret,
Letting your forgiveness touch
All I can't forget

Take the little child in me
Scared of growing old;
Help me here to find my worth
Made in God's own mould.

Take my talents, take my skills,
Take what's yet to be;
Let my life be yours, and yet
Let it still be me.

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Be thou my vision – Audrey Assad

<https://youtu.be/Optrm7IF16s>

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord.
Thou my great Father; thine own may I be,
Thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Thou and thou only first in my heart,
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

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Sermon

I admit when I realised what the gospel reading for today was I did balk at it. It's a difficult story of truth, and sometimes hard truths are tough to hear. 2020 has been a terrible year to live through with the pandemic and all its consequences. I was worried about adding more difficult things to think about when we have all suffered so much this year, How do I convey the message without placing a greater burden onto already-heavy shoulders? I took a walk to clear my head just prior to sitting down to write today's message and as so often happens, the right ideas to explore came through. So today's message may be a difficult one to hear for some but as with all things that take us to God, there is kindness and hope and clear guidance for the path we need to follow.

The gospel reading today tells about how the sheep and goats of the world will be separated out on the day of Judgement. In biblical times sheep and goats were kept together as a mixed flock and were only separated for culling. Ancient people saw sheep as being obedient, intelligent yet quiet. The males were very protective of their families. On the other side of the coin goats had a very different reputation. They were seen as stubborn, and destructive and disobedient. You can see why Jesus uses these characteristics to describe the sheep as being the people of God.

This is where the direction of the passage changes dramatically and there is a painful truth we need to acknowledge. On the Day of Judgement, we will be separated out like sheep and goats. The sheep will inherit the Kingdom and the goats will perish. I can't sugar coat this. This is a formal and stark warning that Jesus delivers. To set this in context, this is the last lesson He delivers to

the masses before his final days on earth, days of betrayal, denial and crucifixion and as the last message, we can know it is of enormous significance. Jesus warns us of the consequences of our actions. We can choose to ignore and deny it or we can choose to hear the warning and put our own house in order.

Jesus could have said “Help your brother and sister when they are in need. If you don’t, you won’t be part of my Kingdom!” But stories are important and they draw us in. With a story we can relate to what is going on. When our emotions are engaged we are able to learn and so apply it to ourselves.

Charles Dickens, the 19th century author certainly knew how to tell a good tale. As a child he experienced poverty and exploitation. His father had mismanaged his finances and eventually ended up in a debtor’s prison. By the age of 10, Charles, like so many other children of the time was working to support his family. Like many authors he used his life-experiences as subjects for his novels. Not only that but he wrote stories that changed perception of the industrialized nations.

One of his most famous stories was that of Ebenezer Scrooge in “A Christmas Carol “. It comes regularly onto our TVs every Christmas and is bit of a favourite in many households. There’ve been loads of adaptations and I’m sure everyone has their own favourite.

The story brings to life the infamously stingy Ebenezer, a character so well known that the name itself is synonymous with being greedy, selfish and uncaring. If someone says, stop being a scrooge we all know what that means. He led a very selfish life and made others miserable by his mean ways. Think of Tiny Tim! Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future and it is made extremely clear to him that if he didn’t change his ways then like the ghost of Jacob Marley he would be eternally-punished. He does change his ways and by the end of the story we see how transformed his life is. Not only do his previous victims benefit but so does he. The point of the story is simple, that love and benevolence can change lives. Dickens doesn’t quote scripture as such but He illustrates through the ghost of Jacob Marley, that there is some form of eternal punishment for being a greedy, selfish and uncaring person.

So here's a very difficult question, how do I know if I'm a sheep or a goat? Or, to put it another way, where am I likely to be going on the Day of Judgement. Does it come down to the things that I do? Or will I be saved by my faith alone?

No, it is much more about what we don't do. What we fail to do. For we can be forgiven for the things we do wrong.

Last Sunday Sarah talked about the talents we have all been given by God. Gifts or instructions that we are required to use. These are to feed the hungry, welcome strangers, visit the sick and imprisoned. Not in any mechanical or automatic kind of way but from a deep-seated and innate love for others, that we feel when we have welcomed God into our lives.

Here's a couple of examples of using one's talents. Which one is the right way?

..... I can choose to buy aid for somewhere in the world, let's say Oxfam. I'm happy to do that and feel that God will be happy and satisfied that I have done what He asked. Or I hurry to help an older person who has fallen in the street. I help her to her feet and gather up her shopping. I check to make sure she isn't injured and I buy her a cup of tea as she's clearly shocked, we chat and then I call her friend to take her home. Next day I ring her to see if she is OK? Here's another one.

.....I routinely donate food items to Haverhill Foodbank, so that me done isn't it? I've been charitable and fed the poor. Or, as well as this, I could contact Reach to see if there is anything they are particularly short of, have they got enough staff support for the pre-Christmas rush, what can I do to help?

The simple truth is that it isn't either/or. If we are in a position to support aid then yes we should, but not to the exclusion of spontaneous, genuine and heartfelt responses to human need. Especially to those on the margins of our society. Those margins are getting wider and wider as many more families are unable to feed their children or pay their bills this year. We, as Christian people, believe that Jesus is everywhere and in the face of anyone. He is more likely to be found in the life of a disadvantaged person than one who is comfortable.

A few years ago some of our church ran a pre-Christmas project called Random Acts of Christmas Kindness, where a team of

people went out of their way to lift the spirits of strangers with unexpected kindnesses. One example, some people sellotaped pound coins onto parking meters for people to park free and little gifts were put under windscreen wipers. Last year Janet and Jan masterminded a huge project, bombing the town with hundreds of home-made knitted angels, each of which had a Christmas message attached. So many felt blessed by finding one of these.

These efforts were all pretty big but each one of us has the capacity, or a central and innate gift to notice the many opportunities out there for showing kindness. It is only when we consistently fail to notice and act upon the opportunities, will we one day on the far side of history, be punished. When we fail to notice and act with kindness we are, honestly, rejecting Jesus.

Faith and compassion for others are like two parallel roads that we drive along to our heavenly destination. We can choose to drive this way or take a wrong turn, it depends where we want to be on Judgement Day.

On that day when the Son of Man comes in glory to sit on His throne we all want to hear verse 34,
“Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world’.

Amen

Song Thine be the glory – Spring Harvest
<https://youtu.be/bmJgbpJQHYU>

Thine be the glory risen conquering Son
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won
Angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away
Kept the folded grave clothes where Thy body lay

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won*

Lo! Jesus meets us risen from the tomb
Lovingly, He greets us scatters fear and gloom
Let the church with gladness hymns of triumph sing
For her Lord now liveth, death hath lost its sting

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won*

No more we doubt Thee glorious Prince of life
Life is naught without Thee, aid us in our strife
Make us more than conquerors through Thy deathless love
Bring us safe through Jordan to Thy home above

*Thine be the glory risen conquering Son
Endless is the victory Thou o'er death hast won*

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Poem 'The Victims'

When you get back to home today,
To cosy house and cosy bed,
Please think of us:
Unloved, unfed.

For some of us it's our own fault,
We're sorry now, but all too late!
We find our folks just won't forgive,
So, can we not avoid our fate?

We don't all choose our life on street,
Cold, wet and hungry, ill-shod feet.
Each life may differ, but none can win,
Please know our hurt: be in our skin.

When next you meet us, be aware,
Do see our faces: the person there.
Think to yourself as you rush by,
There, but for the grace of God, go I.

(Anon.)

The Blessing

Our God of Kindness, send us out eager to search for your face in
everyone we meet, in all encounters, and help us learn how to be
more like you.

Amen