

## Morning Worship and Spiritual Communion

Sixth Sunday of Easter 17 May 2020

### 'The Unknown God'

*The comments on the reading, the poems and the intercessions have been produced by Richard. Thank you so much for these.*

Our church may still be locked but...

This is a precious moment  
to remember that church is bigger than stone and building.

This is perhaps a gentle reminder  
that prayer is larger than architecture and liturgical design.

This is the perfect time to return  
over and over to the sanctuary of the heart.

*This week we are also going to start in a slightly different way with a meditational piece of Taizé music courtesy of the Diocese of Manchester. The words are simple and are relevant to our theme: The Lord is my light, my light and salvation. In Him I trust.*

*The singing and music lasts almost seven minutes. You can join in the chant, or just let the sounds and feelings wash over you, or stop it and return to the service.*

### The Lord is my light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0s5LFUAzns>

*Over the last week there has been some relaxation of the emergency restrictions. We reflect this in our opening prayer.*

### Opening prayer

Good morning, good God!

I'm here to offer you my hope  
but I think I ought to tell you  
that I'm not, well, I'm not truly *hopeful*:  
I just can't claim the *fullness* that *hopeful* seems to imply  
- but I do have hope!

So, I offer you my hope, Lord, the hope I have:  
that this pandemic will end  
and that you will *hasten* the end of this scourge;  
that healing will come and a powerful vaccine;  
and that we'll all become aware of how true it is  
that cleanliness is next to Godliness...

And I offer you my hope, Lord, the hope I have:  
that we're learning new things every day,  
learning from what we're suffering and from our losses;  
learning from all the things, large and small, we're doing without;  
learning from being less at work and more at home;  
learning from being closer to one another  
than we've been in quite some time...

And I offer you my hope, Lord, the hope I have:  
that we won't go back to the old normal  
and that the new normal will be *less* normal  
and *more*, much more grateful and generous,  
simple and pure, loving and kind,  
self-sacrificing and charitable  
and faithful to you and to all things  
genuine, and wise, beautiful and holy...

And finally, Lord, I offer you my hope  
that you'll make me truly *hopeful*:  
that you'll sustain and strengthen the hope I have,  
deepen and heighten the hope I hang on to,  
expand and enlarge the hope I hold...

I pray you'll make me deeply, keenly, truly *hope-full*  
in all things great and small:  
let your mercy be on me, O God,  
as I place my trust in you...  
Amen.

*(From Concord Pastor, a Roman Catholic priest in Concord, Michigan, USA.)*

### **We seek forgiveness**

We are often not the Easter People  
that we should be,  
living in the certain knowledge  
of your great mercy and love.  
Distracted by the world around us  
we fail to hear your voice,  
or hide when faith is challenged  
as we wander off the path.

Lord, help me to trust in you,  
to believe that no prayer goes unheeded,



no word is ever uttered in vain,  
no cry for help ever ignored.  
So that through every fear, and whatever anxiety,  
I may rejoice in your comfort,  
find strength in your love,  
receive your forgiveness  
know peace in your presence. Amen.

You may like to access [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l\\_VwA4d44g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l_VwA4d44g)

for the hymn: *Immortal, Invisible, God only wise*. The words appear on the screen.

### **Alternative collect for the Sixth Sunday of Easter.**

Risen Christ,  
by the lakeside you renewed your call to your disciples:  
help your Church to obey your command  
and draw the nations to the fire of your love,  
to the glory of God the Father. Amen

### **Reading**

Acts 17:22-31 New International Version (NIV)

#### **The Unknown God**

<sup>22</sup> Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. <sup>23</sup> For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

<sup>24</sup> "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. <sup>25</sup> And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. <sup>26</sup> From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. <sup>27</sup> God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. <sup>28</sup> 'For in him we live and move and have our being.'<sup>[a]</sup> As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>29</sup> "Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. <sup>30</sup> In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. <sup>31</sup> For



*The site of the Areopagus, Athens, where Paul preached. The Acropolis is in the distance.*

he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.”

Footnotes:

- a. [Acts 17:28](#) From the Cretan philosopher Epimenides
- b. [Acts 17:28](#) From the Cilician Stoic philosopher Aratus



*This altar in the Palatine Museum, Rome has the inscription: Agnostos Theos – to the unknown god.*

#### **Comment (from Richard)**

The Athenians weren't daft. Greek religion involved a whole panoply of gods and goddesses, and a rum lot they were too with their bickering and jealousies and frankly appalling behaviour. Shrines to them were dotted all over the place, even though at the time of Paul considerable scepticism had already set in among the more sophisticated Greeks about the validity of the official belief system.

However, to be on the safe side, they had included an altar to 'an unknown God' just in case the gods *were* real and they, the Athenians, had accidentally failed to honour one of them with a personal altar. He, she or it might turn nasty at being slighted, so the altar was there to placate any such affronted deity. It should keep him/her/it sweet and (they hoped) well-disposed towards them. The altar to an unknown god was in the nature of an insurance policy.

Paul wasn't daft either. He didn't launch into a headlong attack, haranguing the Athenians and calling their religion downright bonkers: no, he took the more subtle approach of praising them for their religious scrupulosity in acknowledging 'an unknown god', then explaining that the unknown god is now the known God, whom he goes on to proclaim, cleverly including a quotation from a Greek poet to bolster his claims.

Paul's is a subtle approach because he used the Athenians' own way of speaking, thus gaining their agreement, but then shifted the meaning: whereas the Athenians were referring to one (possible) god among many gods, Paul was using the same language to refer

to one God among... er, well, among no other gods. The one and only God. He had been able to introduce a different understanding to the same way of speaking. A little like the way that when Christianity came to Britain, pagan sites and feast days were not abolished but Christianised.

However, the reality of the known God far outstrips the capacity of human words to express it adequately. Any statement about God falls so far short of the reality that, as many have suggested over the centuries, it is often best to remain silent. As T.S. Eliot observed in *Burnt Norton*:

“Words strain,  
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,  
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,  
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,  
Will not stay still...”

But although direct statements about God, and about how we can know God, fall woefully short of the reality, verbal images and metaphors can help point in the right direction. Meister Eckhart, the 13/14<sup>th</sup> century mystic, was, appropriately enough, a master at this. Some of his teachings are encapsulated in the following little poems, taken from my sequence *Echoes of Eckhart*:

**Please scroll down for the poems**

Meister Eckhart brings to God  
A stone

How shall I speak of you?  
It asks

By being a stone  
Says God



With one swing of  
His axe  
Meister Eckhart splits  
A log

From deep within it  
He has heard God  
Cough

How does Meister Eckhart  
Meet  
With God?

By meditation  
And  
Devotion?

By ecstasies  
And  
Grace?

Or by the fireside  
And  
In the stable?

Who needs  
All these words  
When you could have God?

So saying  
Meister Eckhart sits down  
And shuts up



Leaving God behind  
In the silent desert

Meister Eckhart enters  
The noise of the market

But God  
Has beaten him to it

### **Re-echoing Eckhart (from Keith)**

In the last of these poems, Meister Eckhart, realising that God cannot be encompassed by words alone sits down and shuts up. Contemplation is preferable to analysis. A wise move indeed. But the problem is that part of being human is the trait of curiosity. We cannot cope with 'terra incognita', the blank spaces on a map. The drive to explore and hence understand our natural world is not lessened when it comes to the spiritual world. The shrine 'to the unknown god' may well have been a spiritual insurance policy, but for some at least it may also have been a recognition that human knowledge of the gods could only be at best imperfect.

Listening out for the cough of God, finding Him in the everyday world around us, is so Eckhart reminds us, of far greater value than any theological treatise.

You might like to access

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YxvXGgSIRcs&t=37s>

for 'Be Thou my Vision' from Beverley Minster as part of a BBC Songs of Praise service.

### **Intercessions (Richard & the Christian Aid website)**

Though words often fail us  
and we are reduced to silence  
in the face of the mystery of the God  
who knows us far more  
than we can ever know in return,  
we bring what broken words we can  
to the altar of the God who is known  
through the life, teaching, death and resurrection  
of our brother, Jesus of Nazareth.

For the health and well-being of our nation,  
that all who are fearful and anxious  
may be at peace and free from worry:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.

For the isolated and housebound,  
that we may be alert to their needs,  
and care for them in their vulnerability:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.

For our homes and families,  
our schools and young people,  
and all in any kind of need or distress:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.

For a blessing on our local community,  
that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship,  
where all are known and cared for:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,  
and shaping national policies,  
that they may make wise decisions:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers,  
that through their skill and insights  
many will be restored to health:

Lord, hear us,  
Lord, graciously hear us.  
We 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.

### **A short Spiritual Communion**

The Book of Common Prayer reminds us that if we offer ourselves in penitence and faith, giving thanks for the redemption won by Christ crucified, we may truly 'eat and drink the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ', even when we cannot receive the sacrament physically in ourselves.

*So many liked this music that I am including it again. Follow the link to listen to a virtual choir singing: "In resurrectione tua Christe coeli et terra laetentur! (In your resurrection, Christ, heaven and earth rejoice!) To celebrate Easter, 50 young adults from all over the*



world - singers and instrumentalists - share this song from their homes. Thanks to Nigel for finding this one.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-hybuhxJq8&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR3oEVeOH5hcyIksW2zPluBLyeiXIBvZ9Pq5UVVZYNflhEoPBm\\_qw6JsArc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M-hybuhxJq8&feature=share&fbclid=IwAR3oEVeOH5hcyIksW2zPluBLyeiXIBvZ9Pq5UVVZYNflhEoPBm_qw6JsArc)



Lord, have mercy.  
Christ, have mercy.  
Lord, have mercy.

O God,  
help me to trust you,  
help me to know that you are with me,  
help me to believe that nothing  
can separate me from your love  
revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Giving thanks for Christ's death and resurrection you may wish to say*

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,  
for all the benefits you have given me,  
for 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)*

### **Post-Communion Prayer**

Eternal God, whose Son Jesus Christ is the way, the truth, and the life:  
grant us to walk in his way, to rejoice in his truth and to share his risen life;  
who is alive and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.

### **Closing Prayers**

behind the masks  
across the six-foot divides  
Christ arises  
on this virus-infected Easter  
let us come  
with our tears and fears

experience the emptiness  
the loss and despair  
of world-wide grief



may we also see  
benediction in the rising and setting sun  
new life all around us

Christ is risen  
the promise of steadfast love  
the hope of eternal life continue

Breathe deeply  
God shows no partiality  
and always provides

Grace in the wilderness  
in the fear-filled places  
in the heaviness of grief

may we see Christ  
in every face  
in every place

may we breathe in  
the scent of hope  
the promise of new life

from this moment  
be forever changed  
by Love for Love

Christ is risen  
Christ is risen indeed  
Alleluia

go in peace:  
thanks be to God. Amen

*taken from a longer prayer by Rev. Dr. Rachael Keefe, pastor of Living Table United Church of Christ in Minneapolis, USA From [revgalsblogpals.org](http://revgalsblogpals.org)*

God of the world we create, God of the world you reveal: may our way be not of escape, but of further connection. May our life be not for ourselves but for you and others still. May our truth be not what we shape it to be. Instead may we accept the stranger and more glorious truth of what already is: a greater world available through your divine and selfless love.

Amen. *(From the Corymeela Community – thanks to Doreen for this.)*

**Night Prayer is on the next page**

## Night Prayer



If you are able to do so, you might wish to light a candle near a window.

### Opening prayer:

Spirit of the Risen Christ,  
As the lamps light up the evening,  
Shine in our hearts and kindle in us the fire of your love.

So many things have changed, Lord:  
how we live, how we communicate,  
where we go, where we don't go,  
how we worship, how we shop,  
what we do, what we don't do,  
what we shouldn't do, what we can't do,  
how we work, how we play...

As this day ends, Lord,  
remind me of the things that haven't changed:  
the love of family and friends, our faith in you,  
your love for us, your presence all around us,  
our hope for tomorrow helping us through today,  
the changing of the seasons, even if it's slow this year,  
the warmth of the sun, earth's need for rain  
and the light of the moon and stars, always there,  
even when clouds hide their shimmer and shine...

Remind me, Lord, of all that doesn't change  
and remind me, too, of all that *can* change,  
of all that *needs* to change  
in our world, our nation and our communities,  
in our government, our churches and our work places,  
in our communities, our schools and our families

- and most of all, Lord,  
remind me of what needs to change in *me*  
and help me use this time to grow  
in faith in you, in self-knowledge  
and in the grace that helps me become more and more  
the person you created me to be...

Whether I see the moon and stars tonight or not, Lord,  
remind me that, like you, they're always there,  
just behind the clouds, aglow with radiant beauty,  
your light upon my path...

Protect me, Lord, while I'm still awake  
and watch over me when I fall asleep  
that awake I'll keep the watch with you  
and asleep, rest in safety and in peace...

Amen.

*From Concord Pastor*

#### **Developed from Psalm 134**

In the silent hours of night bless the Lord.

O come bless the Lord, all you who serve the Lord,  
who stand in the house of the Lord,  
in the courts of the house of our God.

Lift up your hands to the holy place  
and bless the Lord through the night.

May the Lord bless you from Zion,  
he who made both heaven and earth.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit,  
as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever.  
Amen.

#### **Prayer for others**

I lay before God:

the situations I am anxious for you to be at work in.  
the lives I long to see transformed by the experience of your salvation,  
the peoples and situations that urgently require your justice, Amen.



## **Evening collects**

Be present, O merciful God, and protect us through the hours of this night, so that we who are wearied by the changes and chances of this life may rest in your eternal changelessness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

God our Father, by whose mercy  
the world turns safely into darkness and returns again to light:  
we place in your hands our unfinished tasks,  
our unsolved problems, and our unfulfilled hopes,  
knowing that only what you bless will prosper.  
To your love and protection  
we commit each other and all those we love,  
knowing that you alone are our sure defender,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **Blessing**

May the risen Lord Jesus bless us.  
May he watch over us and renew us  
as he renews the whole of creation.  
May our hearts and lives echo his love.

*You might like to access*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pigh8VHr-ZE>

for 'The day thou gavest Lord is ended', sung by the choir of the Abbey School , Tewkesbury.