

Parish of Central Exeter

17th Sunday after Trinity 26th September 2021

Millstones around Necks (and other Burdens)

Welcome everyone.

Introduction

The readings appointed for today are:

- Psalm 19:7-14 The law of the Lord is perfect
- James 5: 13-20 The power of communal prayer
- Mark 9: 38-50 Jesus has a more inclusive view than his disciples

All these readings are included in our service. Sheila has been away on holiday, so I have written a reflection focusing not on the readings as a whole, but on just one element from the Gospel. However, you will find references to the other readings in the service.

Call to Worship (reflecting the passage from Mark)

God of the salt
God of the fire
God of anger
God of laughter
God of parables and riddles
God of story and proclamation
God of comfort
God of affliction
God of the salt
God of the fire
come now
be now
here now.
Amen.

(written by Katherine Hawker and posted on Liturgy Outside.)



Opening Prayer

We used this prayer in our written service two weeks ago. I make no apology for including it again. In the book, *Basic Christian: The Inside Story of John Stott*, Anglican cleric John Stott shared this prayer. It was his habit to pray it every day.

Good morning heavenly Father,
good morning Lord Jesus,
good morning Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father, I worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe.
Lord Jesus, I worship you, Saviour and Lord of the world.
Holy Spirit, I worship you, sanctifier of the people of God.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

Heavenly Father,
I pray that I may live this day in your presence
and please you more and more.

Lord Jesus,
I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.

Holy Spirit,
I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself
and cause your fruit to ripen in my life:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity,
three persons in one God,
have mercy upon me. Amen.

(John Stott, quoted in Basic Christian: The Inside Story of John Stott)

Gathering Hymn

'New every morning is the love' Sung here by choir of Sheffield Cathedral. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPZn-4ZyGJI>

An act of confession

*Salt is good for seasoning.
But if it loses its flavour, how do you make it salty again? Mark 9:50*

Merciful God,
You call us to be salt of the earth and light of the world.
We confess that our witness is often bland and gloomy.
Forgive us when we fail to be an influence for good,
and when we condone or do what is wrong in Your sight.
Help us to flavour the earth with righteousness
and to reflect the light of Your love in a dark world;
through Jesus Christ, the Light of the world. Amen.

(written by The Rev. Iona MacLean, First Presbyterian Church, Pictou, Nova Scotia)

Assurance of forgiveness

The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.
The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.
Know that you are forgiven,
and be at peace.
Thanks be to God!

The collect for today

Gracious God,
you call us to fullness of life:
deliver us from unbelief
and banish our anxieties
with the liberating love of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen



Psalm 19:

The law of the Lord is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
⁸The precepts of the Lord are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.
⁹The fear of the Lord is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the Lord are firm,
and all of them are righteous.

¹⁰ They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
¹¹ By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
¹² But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
¹³ Keep your servant also from wilful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then I will be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.
¹⁴ May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.



New Testament Reading

James 5 13-20

The Prayer of Faith

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

¹⁷ Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. ¹⁸ Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, ²⁰ remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

Worship music

‘Father, hear the prayer we offer’, sung here by two members of Southport Baptist Church, who have also arranged the music of the traditional ‘Sussex’ tune. It gives a different touch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63f4bxd5QS0>

Gospel Reading

Mark 9 38-50

Whoever Is Not Against Us Is for Us

³⁸ “Teacher,” said John, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

³⁹ “Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, ⁴⁰ for whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.

Causing to Stumble

⁴² “If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. ^[44] ^[45] And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. ^[46] ^[47] And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where

“the worms that eat them do not die,
and the fire is not quenched.’^[49]

⁴⁹ Everyone will be salted with fire.

⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and be at peace with each other.”

Reflection

We shall just take one element of the reading to explore: ‘If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.’



Both Matthew (18: 6-7) and Luke (17: 1-2) contain a similar passage. Matthew's is perhaps more helpful. There we read: ⁶“If anyone should cause one of these little ones to lose his faith in me, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone tied around their neck and be drowned in the deep sea. ⁷How terrible for the world that there are things that make people lose their faith! Such things will always happen, but how terrible for the one who causes them.’ (Good News Bible)

It is clear from the Matthew passage that by ‘little ones’, Jesus is referring to children, as in the previous verses he has placed a child in front of the disciples commenting ‘the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven is the one...who becomes like this child.’

We have become familiar with the ‘millstone around the neck’, although it does not appear in any other English texts until the fourteenth century. The phrase does still get used today, although thanks to Ottery St Mary born Samuel Coleridge, we are more likely to talk of an ‘albatross around the neck’ – the reference being to his epic ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’.

Nevertheless, it seems a strange phrase for Jesus to use. Did he make the concept up? No – it appears that the Romans and Greeks had already spotted its possibilities to add to their collection of unpleasant ways of killing people, although it would have been a relatively quick death compared to crucifixion or being torn to pieces by wild beasts. It would also have the additional benefit of disposal of the body. You can't help wondering how many bodies might have ended up at the bottom of say Lake Gallilee without being those of criminals, and of the role of local fishermen in that process. Perhaps we are all watching too much *Scandi noir*!

The Bible passages all say a large millstone implying it was not a domestic quern-stone used for hand-grinding but a much larger one that required a donkey or camel to make it turn and grind. Well, there is plenty of hyperbole in this whole passage so it may be another exaggeration for effect, or Jesus may actually have been referring to the much smaller quern-stones that each household would have for the daily grind for bread. These would still be heavy enough for use around someone's neck, easier to attach, and readily available.



Now Jesus is not advocating this is something that should happen, but he is suggesting that the consequences of causing a little one – or indeed anyone – to lose their faith will be unpleasant to put it mildly.

If we cut away the other issues here, the factual statement is that a heavy weight can be used to cause someone's death. A heavy weight is seen here is physical, but it also be metaphorical as indeed can be death. There are other sorts of weights we tie on ourselves and on others.

Jesus again in Matthew 23: 4 (speaking about the Pharisees): 'They tie onto people's backs loads that are heavy and hard to carry, yet they aren't willing even to lift a finger to help them carry those loads.'

The sad reality is that as individuals, as a church, as a nation and even in groupings of nations, we make life difficult for ourselves and for other people. It's not too hard for you to come up with your own examples.

Yet Jesus says: Matthew (11: 28 -30) ²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Well it may be possible to hear some hollow laughter as you read those words. 'It's not as easy as that'. 'You don't really understand my circumstances'. 'If I don't care, no-one else will'. It's hard to know how many of our burdens are self-inflicted, but they are probably more than we care to admit.

In this season of Creationtide one thing we are going to have to learn is to live more simply, consuming less of the world's resources and creating fewer carbon emissions. The albatross in the Ancient Mariner eventually fell off the seaman: the millstone stays on the body and carries it down to the depths. Is our life-style an albatross or a millstone?

Prayer

O God, we know that Jesus sent out his disciples
without purse, luggage, or sandals.
All too often, we find ourselves clinging to possessions we don't need,
looking for safety by avoiding risk,
and bearing heavy burdens that slow us down.
Forgive us for our reluctance to travel lightly and heal us of our pain and guilt.

(Revd Heather Moody on Worship Ways website)

Intercessions (reflecting the letter of James)

Father of Lights, from whom comes every perfect gift,
hear our prayers which we offer to you,
and in the name of our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray for the church,
that we might show forth our faith in action,
regard all with impartiality,
and be quick to listen and slow to anger.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for our nation,
that whenever trials may befall us,
that God may grant us endurance and wisdom.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for the world,
that the lowly may be raised up,
and that mercy may fall on us all.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for the sick, the injured, the vulnerable,
and those undergoing all forms of adversity,
that they might all be raised up; especially _____.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for those celebrating this week, especially _____.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

We pray for those who have died (especially ____),
that they would draw near to God, and that God would draw near to them.
Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Gracious God,
let our prayers be offered to you
with the gentleness that is born from your wisdom from above,
that is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, and full of mercy. **Amen.**

(written by Rick Morley, and posted on his A Garden Path blog.)

The Lord's Prayer

Eternal Spirit, Father and Mother of us all,
Holy is your name.

Let justice and mercy fill all Creation
and let us recognize
that every thought and thing belongs to you.

Feed us with the bread we need for today.
Forgive our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.



Stand with us in trial and temptation.
Free us from the grip of all that is evil.

For you alone are creating our universe,
now and forever. **Amen.**

(from the Seekers Church)

Affirmation

Jesus said: Take up your cross.

We will follow you, O Christ,
into the needs of the world,
into the truth of our lives,
into the pain of our hearts,
into the presence of God. Amen.

(by Brian Woodcock, in Traveling to Easter with Jesus as our Guide, posted on the website of Patmos Abbey—The Order of Saint Columba.)

The Peace

If alone, smile and hug yourself (God does). If otherwise, share the Peace as appropriate.

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.

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.

An offertory prayer

We may not be in church, but we can still offer ourselves and our talents to God.



Blessed are you, God and creator of the universe,
as we offer you our activities, thanksgivings and our life.
We present ourselves, and our world, as we are and as you can make us,
for everything in heaven and on earth is yours,
and of your own do we give you. Blessed be God for ever.

*Because there is no Breaking and Sharing we can have only Spiritual Communion with Christ.
I'm sure you can find a way to use a few minutes of silence or conversation to enjoy this, and
make it a sacramental moment.*

*As we prepare for communion you might like to listen to the
Langford Singers with 'The Table of the Lord', words by
Richard, music by Nigel.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCZmrj81t8o>



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.



Post Communion Collect

Lord, we pray that your grace
may always precede and follow us,
and make us continually to be given to all good works;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Commission & Benediction

(inspired by James 5:13-20)

Go now and celebrate wherever God's name is honoured.
When suffering comes, pray in faith.
In times of joy, sing songs of praise.
Persevere in prayer and action
to bring the fallen back to the truth.

And may God save you from all that would harm you;
May Christ Jesus heal you and raise you up;
and may the Holy Spirit anoint you
and give you peace with one another.

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

(Nathan Nettleton on LaughingBird.net)

Closing Hymn

'Do not be afraid for I have redeemed you', sung here by Marilla Ness. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v2rOOLhSWJ0>

