

Home Worship October 2020 – Revd Robin Wooldridge

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for My sake shall find it. For what is man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matthew 16:25-26)

Take a look around you. What do you see? People searching for the next promotion – a chance to earn more money, greater prestige. Offers of loans, of get rich quick schemes. Young people believe that their life is not worth living until they get the latest mobile phone upgrade or the newest trainers. We are taught -pushed- perhaps to buy more, consume more. Indeed, our worth is seen in terms of how much we can consume! But why? Let's just hit the pause button for a moment. What are people really seeking when their efforts and even purpose in life is totally focused on the next designer top? If we are to be honest with ourselves, the answer to this question would be happiness or fulfilment. But can happiness be gained by buying yet another pair of fashion shoes? Certainly, you may say. But for how long? Look in the charity shops on the High Street, each filled with things people had once desired – dreamt about owning. The very things that they believed would bring long term happiness now discarded- dumped outside the charity shop in a black bin liner!

The Teachings show us that man is both natural and spiritual. We feel that our life is our life – to do with what we choose. Yet, the Teachings show us that this is true in appearance only – without the Lord we are nothing. We have turned away from loving the Lord and neighbour to loving ourselves and the ways of the world. The second verse really shows us that that our spiritual inner reality – our soul - is far more valuable than anything we can own within the natural world. The Divine Word teaches that angels are the souls or spirits of just men made perfect – they appear as spiritual beings in human form – though invisible to the natural eye. In Revelation, John saw the spirit of one of his brethren (19:10) and he also saw beings who had come from earth – the souls or spirits of men (7:9, 14). These were seen as spiritual beings in human form.

So, as we begin to ponder the truth revealed in the Teachings we start to appreciate that our life is far more than what it appears - and that we are greater than we see reflected in the mirror or in the certificates and diplomas that grace our wall. The material body is a dwelling place of our spirit during our short time in the world of nature. This material body has no life in itself but receives all of its life from the soul or spirit which comes from the Lord. This material body will be cast aside at death as we enter the next world.

Our spirit, our soul is of inestimable value. The Teachings reveal what we must do to become more spiritual, to nurture the soul and what we need to do for our own salvation.

My very good friend Rev. Clitheroe was once invited to take a tour of one of his parishioner's homes. The man was very rich and had just bought an enormous

mansion. The man took Rev. Clitheroe into the drawing room, games room and every bedroom on each floor of the mansion. The tour lasted two hours after which the rich man asked Rev Clitheroe, 'Tell me Rev. Clitheroe, what impressed you most about my house?' Rev. Clitheroe thought for a minute and then replied, 'The fact that the earth can support such a structure'.

Prayer: Let me rest in You, Lord, and wait patiently for you. Amen

Reflection: What is success? Is your view of success different to that found in the world?

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’ (Matthew 5:3)

This is the opening of one of the most loved parts of the Word – the Sermon of the Mount. We read that those who heard the Lord were astonished by His doctrines. We would also feel the same amazement for He was more than human and nothing less than ‘God manifest in the flesh’. In our world a person is said to be blessed when he has a healthy bank balance and status. Yet here the Lord blesses spiritual poverty, mourning, meekness, spiritual hunger and thirst, mercy, persecution and being hated and reviled for His sake. To most people these would hardly appear to be blessings. But the Lord was speaking of another world. The kingdom of which the Lord spoke was a spiritual kingdom.

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven’. How can there be blessedness in spiritual poverty? The key to understanding this lies in the Word when we read that the Lord’s words were ‘spirit and life’ (John 6:63). We also read ‘The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life’ (2 Cor. 3:6). This shows that the sense of the letter, or the literal sense, contains the spiritual sense which is both rational and enlightening. All the sayings of the Lord have a spiritual significance. Reflect for a moment on the fig tree – cursed for it had no fruit only leaves. See this as relating to the church at that time. The Church had spiritual knowledge but did not practice it. Indeed, it also refers to every man who has the Lord’s will but has not lived according to it.

A man who has sufficient and is content is not really a poor man – even if what he has doesn’t amount to much. But another man possessing great wealth feels poor if he craves for more wealth. He is poor because he does not have enough to satisfy him. Spiritual wealth consists of goodness and truth in heart and mind. He who is poor in spirit has these to a greater or lesser degree. He feels unworthy if aspires for greater spiritual knowledge. This is the man who is ‘poor in spirit’ as the more he wishes to gain spiritually, the more the Lord can impart to him from Himself. ‘Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled’ (Matt. 5:6). So, to receive heavenly joys we must first become heavenly in character – by having the kingdom of God within us.

One of the Rev Clitheroes’s richest parishioners had die. The next morning another rich member of the congregation who had a reputation for being a miser asked. ‘I wonder how much money he left?’ ‘Every single penny’, replied the Rev. Clitheroe.

Rev. Clitheroe had a dream. He dreamt he was selling an old pair of his socks for £10,000. The man in the dream counted out £9,000 and then stopped. ‘Give me £10,000, you agreed £10,000’ shouted out the Rev. Clitheroe. This outburst woke Rev. Clitheroe from his sleep. After looking around the room for the potential customer, Rev Clitheroe again lay down in his bed, closed his eyes and said ‘OK give me £9,000’.

Prayer: O Lord, let me commit my way to you. And trust also in You, and You shall bring it to pass. Amen

Reflection: Does one need to be poor in order to be spiritual?

‘Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shall thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed’ Psalm 37:3

The Psalms may be described as a handbook of practical divinity. In this psalm, the psalmist believed to be David, teaches man to believe in the Lord and hints at the benefits that he will enjoy as a result of following this path of trust. The notion of trust features throughout the Word: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man that trusteth in Him’ (34: 8). And, ‘Our fathers trusteth in Thee; they trusted and Thou didst deliver them’ (12:4). In Isaiah we read, ‘Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee; because he trusteth in Thee’ (26:3). So, what does trust in the Lord mean? More importantly how can we trust the Lord?

The Lord has revealed his essence and nature to us: Divine Love and Wisdom. We are taught to love the Lord and love the neighbour. These are the prescribed rules which if followed leads us to happiness, contentment and regeneration. The path described by the Lord is not easy and comes with challenges. We pay lip service to the Lord as we recite ‘thy will be done’ but at the same time we think of how our will could be done! We try to enter into a contract with the Lord: ‘Please let me get this promotion I deserve it. I’ll pray more and give more to the church’. But this is the way of the market- not the way of the Lord. In the market place we can barter, haggle – even deceive to get what we want. We can see what is at stake. On the spiritual path things are different; we cannot see what is stake, we have no personal understanding of regeneration. The ways of the market place will not work with the Lord – we must learn a totally different approach. This is when we must learn to move away from the love of self and the ways of the world and move towards the love of the Lord and Love of the neighbour. This is when we begin to open the Word and start to learn about the Lord and ourselves. We cannot argue with the Lord as we have no prior knowledge. We must first learn, first trust. But this trust is not of the market place. We are not deciding that this person or that person is trustworthy; this trust is different. This trust is unconcerned with the world, this trust is a quality of our being. This trust is of the heart. We trust the Lord because we understand. We understand that we are part of the infinite world that lies beyond the natural. The Lord has revealed Himself and invites each and every one of us to ‘come follow me’. The Psalmist writes: ‘So shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed’. But this is not being fed in the natural sense. This is the path of regeneration. When regenerated we have the kingdom of God with us (Luke 5:21). We have the kingdom within us when we are ruled by the Lord’s law – when the love of the Lord is our ruling love when we are conjoined with the Lord. ‘God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him’ (1 John 4: 16 v. 3). We can only realise contentment once our hearts and minds have been fed by spiritual love and truth. ‘Blessed’ said the Lord, ‘are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled’ (Matt. 5:6). In Revelation we read of those who have been fed this food on earth that ‘they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more,’ ‘for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes’ (7:16,17).

My friend Rev. Clitheroe once owned a donkey. He was very protective of that donkey. One day a member of his congregation arrived at his house. ‘I wonder’, enquired the man, ‘if I could borrow your donkey for the afternoon’. Rev. Clitheroe, quickly replied, ‘My donkey’s gone away for a few days’. Suddenly from the back yard there was a loud ‘Hee – Haw’. ‘Your donkey’s in the yard’, said the man. ‘No, he isn’t’ replied Rev. Clitheroe. ‘Yes, he is’ said the man ‘I’ve just heard it’. ‘Who do you trust?’ asked Rev Clitheroe. ‘Me or the donkey?’

Prayer: O Lord, let me find the blessing that comes from trusting in You and having You as my hope. Amen

Reflection: Is it easy to trust? What happens when we trust?

'Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven' (Luke 6:37)

Let us remember that Love of the Lord and of the neighbour makes the life of heaven. It makes the joy, happiness and peace of the angels or of 'just men made perfect' in the Lord's kingdom. The Lord is love and it is in that love that He makes men one with Himself and Himself one with men. The Lord is the source of life and His life is love. The Lord is life itself and therefore love itself and this descends from the heavens to man on earth. We are receptacles of life from the Lord and as life flows into us makes us into the likeness of Him. This love conjoins us to the Lord and the Lord with us. This love is the test of those who have embraced the Lord: 'By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another' (John Ch. Xiii v. 35). In John we read, 'Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love' (John 4:7,8). Only where there is love is there a willingness to forgive. The Lord teaches us to both cherish and practice this forgiving spirit. Peter asked the Lord, 'How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, until seven times: but until seventy times seven' (Matt. 18:21-22). In other words, an infinite number. The Lord teaches us. 'Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven' (Luke 6:37) and in the Lord's prayer, 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'.

True forgiveness only exists if there is repentance. A person who repents is entitled to forgiveness from whomever he has offended. This is followed by reconciliation and a restoration of the relationship once enjoyed by those concerned. But what is meant by repentance and forgiveness? Being sorry is not repentance. True repentance is a change in the mind and life of a person. It is a 180° turn. Such a change is gradual. Consider how the Lord removed the enemies of Israel 'little by little' (Exod. 23:30). In Mark we read, 'first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear' (Mark 4:28). Our sins are gradually removed and the benefits of forgiveness gradually received. But why seek forgiveness in the first place? It is so we can be conjoined with the Lord and enter heaven. We can only become one with the Lord if He dwells in our hearts by His Spirit but the Spirit cannot dwell in a heart full of evil. We cannot enter heaven unless we are at first purified. Consider the prodigal son who could not dwell in his father's house without changing his ways and being one in heart and mind with his parent. In order for a person to be forgiven the evil disposition must be removed and his mind and understanding changed.

How do we know that we are forgiven? That are prayers have been answered? We examine ourselves – does evil still lurk in the corners of our heart? We can only forgive one another when our minds are in freedom. A person cannot be forced to forgive another.

Once a man asked the Rev. Clitheroe, 'which is wiser: your donkey or man?'. Rev Clitheroe replied in an instant: 'My donkey'. The man replied: 'How so?' Rev Clitheroe explained. 'Because my donkey carries loads but does not ask for more, whereas man, even if he is overwhelmed by responsibility, often chooses to add more.'

Prayer: O Lord, You have taught that everyone is created to live forever in a state of happiness. Help me follow You in a life of obedience and usefulness that I may find eternal joy. Amen

Reflection: How easy/difficult is it to forgive? Can you think of a case of true forgiveness?

Jethro's Advice

Please Read Exodus 18:13-27

Jethro notices that Moses is overburdened with the duties of leadership. And so, he makes a practical suggestion: delegate some of the duties to others. This would allow Moses to concentrate on those matters that only he could handle and at the same time it would develop and encourage other leaders within the community of Israel.

*As for the formation of faith, this takes place by a person approaching the Lord, learning truths from the Word, **and living by them**. The reason why faith is formed by a person learning truths from the Word is that faith essentially is truth. Truths in the Word contain the truths which lead to salvation. Faith is formed by a person living by truths, because spiritual life is living in accordance with truths, and **truths do not really come alive until they are realised in deeds**. The Lord's words are all of them truths. True Christian Religion*
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Moses is the leader of the Israelites and everyone respected Moses because he communicated and mediated between the people and God. And so, every time there is a question about what they should do or a judgment that needs to be made between two people, they go to Moses. They trust him because the Lord speaks through him. In our reading today Moses is spending all day doing this work. He sits before the people from morning until evening. Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, sees this and gives Moses some advice. He says "what you are doing is not good. You and these people who come to you will only wear yourselves out." The inner meaning of this story is about how we can wear ourselves out trying to judge our actions and motives, trying to judge ourselves. There are times when we feel like we are in a wilderness, feeling confused over where we are supposed to go and what we are supposed to do. The simple truths that we cling to – can be in danger of wearing out and becoming too much for us.

In these moments the Lord's advice to us is to listen to Jethro's advice to Moses. This disorganised group of Israelites need to get organised! We need structure in our mind. That organised system of truth allows us to think for ourselves, to make decisions as to what the Lord wants us to do and so progress through the wilderness of our lives towards the promised land. If we accept this 'doctrine' into our thinking it will allow us if we so wish to move away from just obedience to truth and onwards into a love for the truth and finally into good itself. Being in good itself is experiencing the peace of heaven. That is the satisfying peace that Jethro talks about when he says, "if you do this and God so commands, you (Moses) will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." There is no longer the struggle inside of us to obey truths we do not want to obey! There is only the peace and satisfaction of doing the Lord's will because we want to do the Lord's will.

The important message for us in this story is that we have to judge ourselves from the truth in the Lord's Word. We must make a judgment in the way that we act out our responsibilities in life from what we understand of the truth. In loving the Lord and serving our fellows is the structure that Jethro teaches to Moses and that is the structure that the Lord is seeking to show to us. Faith is not just obedience or a belief. Our faith is accepting into our living those truths we have seen and then acted upon. We must have a structured responsibility to live our lives according to how we see and understand what the Lord is speaking to us through His Word. Our faith must be living and dynamic – not ideas!

We can then put our trust in the Lord and He will guide us into our personal place of peace and heavenly satisfaction. For such a gift as this – thanks be to God. Amen.

Home Worship: November 8th 2020: Service prepared by Stephen Thomas

Remembrance Sunday

Today is a day for looking back, for recollection and remembering. Today is also a day for looking ahead, for resolution, for thinking about our vision for a better world. Today we remember those who have lost their lives through the horrors and sufferings of war. The first and second world wars often dominate our thoughts at this time, but we need also of course to remind ourselves of the other areas of conflict where people in the armed forces have seen action and died in the cause of freedom, peace and justice.

We so often find it hard to see signs of hope around us. There are so many overwhelming signs of struggle, tragedy and suffering, so many people worried about their futures. And with the current pandemic we now have a new **invisible enemy** – coronavirus or Covid 19! When we look at what lies before us for ourselves and the world, it so often seems that death is more powerful than life, greed is more powerful than generosity and kindness, and the idea of hope is something that is hard to sustain. We need to remember that all those who have put their lives on the line in war did so in the belief that evil and tyranny and oppression could be overcome. We need to remember as well that they did not die in vain through their courage, bravery and sacrifice. Their devotion to duty which is a truly great quality of human leadership. That they lived in hope, the hope of a better world in which our **remembrance** of them offers new hope in sharing their vision of a new and better world today. Where we too can experience that most important gift of freedom. On this Remembrance Sunday, despite these services year after year, it is so easy to forget the horror of war and how readily we close our eyes and ears to the lessons of history. We are all in God's hands and whether we work with Him for peace or against Him with our own self wanting, He will still guide our lives in so many ways and circumstances to bring us safely home to Him if we so wish. That is His wonderful way and we can be sure that He will work it!

Please read Micah 4:1-7

An inspiring prophecy from the Old Testament. A time in the future when after a period of punishment, trial and desolation, Israel would be restored to its former glory. The people of many nations would be gathered together in true recognition of the Lord to hear His Word and to walk in His path of peace and spiritual prosperity. A reminder that when the swords and spears of war are no longer required, they will be changed into farm implements and people will be able to live contently and joyfully with the Lord and their neighbour.

A reminder that when the Lord comes to us, that is, when we truly receive Him into our hearts, this pruning of our own trees or vines will replace the activities represented by spears which are designed to hurt and kill our fellows. Spears, like arrows in the Word of God correspond to the truths of doctrine we all need to fight against what is wrong and false in our relationships with others. But when the battle is over then we can turn to the subtler task of refining and strengthening the truth we understand so that it will produce good fruit. Self-evaluation, self-judgment and self-improvement with the Lord's help are what make up our Christian life of loving service once all the intellectual arguments are over. Not just understanding truth but using it. A change of personal behaviour and not clever reasoning.

Wars and disasters are not just earthly events. They reflect a mirror image within us as we struggle to control our selfishness. We need to remember that the battles we fight within us each day should be a painful realisation of how much of our self-centred life must be broken up and destroyed so that new spiritual life within us can begin. It must start with each one of us and it has to start right now.

Our swords into ploughshares and our spears into pruning hooks.

The Secret of Life

Please read Matthew 5:1-12 – The Beatitudes

The word **blessed** which is used in each of the beatitudes is a very special word. It is the Greek word **Makarios**. Makarios is the word which specially describes the gods. In our Christian life there needs to be this godlike joy. Makarios describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life. Jesus said, in John's Gospel "No one, will take your joy from you." These beautiful and inspiring beatitudes speak of that joy which moment by moment calls to us through our pain, that joy which sorrow and loss, and pain and grief, are powerless to touch, that joy which shines through our tears, and which nothing in life or death can ever take away.

*The Lord's Divine Providence extends to the least singulars of a person's life; for there is only One Fountain of Life, which is the Lord, from whom we are, live and act. **Heavenly Doctrine 268***

We all wish to be happy. We all want to feel the satisfaction that comes from the sense of success and usefulness. And some people seem to achieve it! Some people, in spite of a few difficulties here and there, seem to have found happiness. So how is it done? How have some people discovered how to be happy? Is there some secret that has not been revealed to the masses yet?

The Lord said, "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." Matthew 5:6 (Beatitudes). He did not say Blessed are they who are bloated! It is only when we sense the emptiness in our lives and sincerely yearn for loving spiritual qualities in changing our selfish behaviour – being useful and compassionate and loving – then the Lord can provide.

It is in our persistent efforts that the Lord can achieve much. Persistence is built into the nature of the Lord because His love cannot be anything but that. The Lord stands at the door and knocks - constantly, incessantly. There is never a time in our lives when the Lord ceases His efforts to reach us and lead us, for His love desires to make us happy in all things. The only problem is to what extent we wish to receive that love. By following Him by being persistent, by being loyal and faithful in following His commands and teachings, even when it is not easy or delightful, the doors are open and we shall receive as much spiritual food as we want.

In our earthly trials and temptations when we constantly face spiritual difficulties – then what is the secret to survive and overcome in our anguish and listlessness? The only real key, the secret, is our persistence in clinging to what is good and true.

This is surely the great secret in our lives. Although we sometimes experience emptiness, doubt and despair and even sometimes fall away from our Lord's commands and teachings – it does not mean that all is hopeless. Although we may desperately want everything to run smoothly in our lives, and want the happiness and joy that we see promised in the Lord's Word, it will not be suddenly handed to us. But if we persist and continue to follow the Lord's teachings and act upon them and be guided by Him and trust in Him, then the door is opened and we can receive as much spiritual food and drink to nourish us on our pathway to salvation.

It is as the Lord said to Joshua when commanding him to lead the people, "Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:9

WHY HEAVEN?

Please Read John 3: 3-15

We know no more of Nicodemus than John's Gospel tells us. The name is Greek, but by now the Jews were using Greek names. He was not only a Pharisee, but also a member of the Sanhedrin which ruled the Jews, and he might well think it wiser to consult such a controversial figure as Jesus by night. Nonetheless, his question should remind us that although John's Gospel uses "the Jews" for those Jews who opposed Jesus, it was not intended to condemn all Jews. In Nicodemus, there was one Jew who had come wanting to learn what this new teacher had to say. The image of a birth reminds us that to be "born again" is not done in a moment. It is not a simple assertion that we will follow Jesus. It is a complete life-long remaking of our mind and spirit. The life that we accept from Jesus conceives in us a new person. There is an actual birth of a new kind of life in us, and that must grow and acquire all the powers of life, which before were used only for our own self-satisfaction. We shall come to know a great deal of pain as we reject our old self and bring this new angelic self to birth: and this process will take up a good deal of our lives in this world. We so often afraid that the opposing thoughts and feelings which still arise in us mean that we have failed. However if we are truly sincere in our effort to be born again and change ourselves, then the Lord can keep our new birth growing until we become the life He is moment by moment breathing into us. If the work is not completed in this world, then He will complete it in heaven.

Heaven is within each individual in proportion to their reception of love and faith from the Lord, and whoever receives heaven from the Lord while in this world, comes into heaven after death

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To seek eternal life is not to live forever! We will all do that in the afterlife anyway. Eternal life is the kind of life that draws its love and joy from the love of God. That can never cease because it comes from the eternal life of God. All His love is unselfish, seeking only to give itself and its joy away to us, for that is the whole purpose behind creation. We can only receive the quality of such love and joy when we too have no thought of ourselves, but only of how we might help others. To give up possessing our own life just for our selfish purposes is the only way to gain the joy of God in our living and so gain the "eternal" kind of life.

All our rebirth and living with God should bring within ourselves a chosen love to serve others. This is done because we love God and we love our fellows. Our life would be lived in such service whatever the outcome for us. But the love that makes the Lord's kingdom of Heaven is not conditional on any reward or fear of any punishment. If it were, it would not be a love for others, still less of God, but a love instead of the reward we would hope for! That would be basically selfish and destroy any concept of unselfish Christian life. At the very beginning of our repentance and rebirth such factors may operate, but once we truly begin to live with God, put our trust in Him and work with Him then those factors will have no place in our living. We may think of heaven as a state in which our love will have a greater ability to serve others, but then of course, our heart will be upon the service we give and not on ease and reward!

The personal choice that we make to live with God begins our new life. Our effort to be reborn again. The deeds of the past are forgotten and the loving way of life that we have chosen becomes our whole new world.

For us, the message of death is of new life (think of the Easter message of resurrection). If we will live with God here in this world then, with all of our past failings and shortcomings ('warts and all'), we can be cleansed to live with Him after death and truly know the joy and service of heaven.

ADVENT

Please Read Mark 1: 1-11

Please read Isaiah 40: 1-5 and 9-11

The prophecy of Isaiah which speaks of the coming of the Lord and in Mark's Gospel that fulfilment of the prophecy – "prepare the way of the Lord and make His paths straight." The forerunner John the Baptist preaching an urgent message of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Today, we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent and very much we are thinking of preparing a way for the Lord by making His paths straight. In this season of Advent, we celebrate the joy of the Lord's coming among each one of us. Let us each make a personal vow to make a straight path within our hearts and minds so that each of us may come to know His vision and joy of loving service.

Our thoughts so often seem to grow from the many duties and activities which at first sight may not seem obviously harmful, but because they lack any loving intentions towards others, they are barren, desolate and empty – a wilderness! Our thinking has become a wilderness of self-seeking with no straight path to God in sight. We have not prepared a pathway for His coming within each one of us.

This season of Advent is a time of preparation! To prepare a way inside each of us so that the Lord can reach us. Are we prepared? God who makes us and keeps us alive moment by moment sent His life into our world to live like us – to experience life as a real baby with nothing more than sensations, to grow up learning the truth, to feel that pressure of selfishness and evil and so reject them. To endure what we must endure in time and to feel what we must feel and so much more...all this to bring the strength of His love back into this earthly life of ours.

To give us life to fight our selfishness God had to bring His love into every part of our human life. This is the true pathway of love and compassion that moment by moment we must make STRAIGHT within our hearts and minds day by day. This is the love that God brought into this world to live inside each one of us. This is the joy that will have no end.

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, in this season of Advent we begin our preparations to celebrate Your coming into our world. Be with us now and help us to know Your nearness in every moment of our lives. Over the years people have prepared for Your coming: they looked for a king and conqueror and when You came as a baby they missed seeing You; when You came as the "suffering servant" with the power of Your love to make a great change in the world they rejected You. Let us not miss Your coming now, in our worship together and out in the world.

Our Advent candles will burn brightly to remind us all of the joy that came into our world through Jesus Christ, God with us, Immanuel.

But when our Christmas season is over the candles will burn low and die out. Although we rejoice in all the colour and light of the Advent Season, we shall rejoice even more because of the true light of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, the light of the world which can never be extinguished. Come into our lives Lord Jesus and enlighten within each one of us a flame of love that will never die. Amen

From Advent to Christmas

A series for Home Worship in December 2020 by Alan Misson Sunday 6th December

Prepare the Way

Suggested Reading: Isaiah 40; Matthew 3:1-12; True Christian Religion 510

*A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Isaiah 40:3*

Throughout the Old Testament we learn of many prophets whose role in life was to be the voice of God, the conscience of the people or a leader in troubled times. Prophets were often turned away, or not listened to, or completely ignored, but they nevertheless had important things to say from God to the people.

In the New Testament John the Baptist was the son of Mary's cousin Elizabeth and he was 6 months older than Jesus. John took up the role of prophet and got used to living in the wilderness. But when he came to the people they wondered who he was, not knowing that he was effectively the last great prophet. John presented two things to those willing to hear - the need to be baptised and the need to repent, which was not an accepted idea at the time. He was particularly aggressive to the scribes and Pharisees but he was humble and his role was to prepare the way of the Lord.

The season of Advent is about getting ready or being prepared for Christmas and in our spiritual lives it is about preparing our hearts and minds to receive the Lord just as the manger was made ready to receive the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. But are we prepared to *make straight in the desert a highway for our God*.?

The key to being able to receive the Lord in our lives is through doing what John the Baptist proclaimed -we need to turn away from sin and take up a new life. This is not a once and only situation, it is going to be repeated time and time again in our lives as we choose what is right and reject what is wrong. In many ways John the Baptist is a picture of our conscience through which the Lord can speak to us. It is our conscience that should remind us to examine what we are doing, to reflect on whether we have strayed of the straight and narrow, to remind us to repent, and to help us move forward to new life.

Towards the end of Isaiah 40 we are reminded that the strength we need to follow the dictates of our conscience comes from the Lord providing we put our trust in him.

*He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.
Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted;
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:29-31*

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you know my deepest desires and I know the vision of your kingdom...
I bring before you those elements in my life in need of your transforming power

- that which I misuse or neglect, that which I most reluctantly let go of,
- that which I believe is not good enough.

Inspire me and disturb me to examine my deepest desires.
Prepare me for your way, O Lord.

From Advent to Christmas

A series for Home Worship in December 2020 by Alan Misson

Sunday 13th December

You shall call his name Jesus

Suggested reading: Genesis 17:1-8, 15-16; Luke 1:26-38; Arcana Caelestia 3004

And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus."

Luke 1:26-38

How did you get your name? Many people get their names from close relatives but in past centuries most children were named after Kings and Queens or Biblical characters. Family names are a relatively recent introduction and were originally derived from where the people lived or what they did. Our names are very important to us. And so are the names in the Bible which is full of the names of people and more importantly of the names of God.

Try and put yourself for a moment in Mary's shoes. She has had a tremendous shock. Not only has she been visited by an angel but she has also learnt she is going to be a mother when she least expected it. And not only that, she and Joseph do not have a choice of what to call the baby. No wonder Mary was greatly troubled and Gabriel needed to calm her down - *"do not be afraid Mary"*

What name would Mary and Joseph have chosen? Well you can get some idea by reading through the genealogy at the start of Matthew chapter 1. There are 40 names, all different, so even if they stuck to a family name they had a very wide choice. But of course this was not to be. The baby that Mary was to bear had to be called Jesus, no other name would do! Think about all the people you know and their names. Mention one of their names and you instantly have a picture of the person in mind. You recall what they are like, what they do or say, how they behave, what they wear and where they live and what they mean to you. Our names take on our essential nature, and they convey in a very shorthand way who we really are.

In the Old Testament there are a large number of names describing the Divine character - for example - The Ancient of Days, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. All these names convey something about an essential nature of God that we can experience in our lives. Remember too that the names of Abram and Sarai were changed to Abraham and Sarah to reflect the wonderful change in their essential characters brought about by the presence of God in their lives. But as God took upon himself human nature and was born as a baby to Mary in Bethlehem a new name for the Divine was needed. And this name is Jesus which is the Greek form for the Hebrew Joshua which itself means "Salvation of Yahweh".

God's purpose in coming into our world was for our salvation and we can experience his essential nature as our Saviour as we let his love, power and peace prevail in our lives against our selfish tendencies.

"you shall call his name Jesus"

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, your name brings to my mind your character of unconditional love and boundless wisdom and your never ending desire to save me from my selfishness. By contrast the names I am known by reflect my very imperfect character which has so little of your image and likeness in it. Help me to try to close the gap between your perfect nature and my imperfect nature by giving me the strength and courage to follow your way through life. May I always honour your name as holy.

From Advent to Christmas

A series for Home Worship in December 2020 by Alan Misson

Sunday 20th December

Love came down at Christmas

Suggested reading: Exodus 33:12-23; John 1:1-18; Arcana Caelestia 3704

“But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” Exodus 33:20

“And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me. His voice you have never heard, his form you have never seen.” John 5:37

Take a piece of paper and write the words **Love is ...** on it. Then without thinking too hard and without reading on through this reflection just write down a number of different ways to finish this sentence.

You probably wrote something like Love is caring, or Love is sharing, or Love is being together, or Love is giving, or Love is wishing joy to others. What this simple exercise shows us is that love in itself is unknowable and cannot be understood and yet we can know and experience love when it takes form and is active in our daily living. You cannot see love or measure it but you can see and measure its effects when it flows into action for others.

The quotations above from Exodus 30 and John 5 clearly show that the very being of God is also unknowable and this very being of God, called in the New Testament the ‘Father’, is Love itself. Just as we cannot really know love unless it takes on an active form we cannot experience the Love that is God unless it too takes on form and is active in our world. And that is just what we celebrate at Christmas – the Love that is God coming into our world. Christina Rossetti beautifully captured this essential truth in the first lines of her well known poem –

*Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine;
love was born at Christmas: star and angels gave the sign.*

God itself or Love itself came into our world in Jesus Christ so that we could know God and know Love *“If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him”* John 14:7. Jesus also proclaimed that the works he did were from the Father, that is, from the Love within him that was God – *“For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me”* John 5:36.

And the Love that is the very being of God is unconditional – it is freely shared and demands nothing in return. As Jesus grew up he became more and more aware of the Love at the core of his being – a perfect Love that he needed to express in every aspect of his life and through it show us what true love really is. In living this Love perfectly in the world Jesus united himself with the Father within and with his death and resurrection completed the circle of love. Our role in life is to follow this example, albeit in a finite way, and seek to unite ourselves with the Love that is the source of our life.

Prayer

Because you made the world, and intended it to be a good place, and called its people your children;
because when things seemed at their worst, you came into our world to bring out the best in us;
so, gracious Lord, I gladly say:

Goodness is stronger than evil, Love is stronger than hate,
Light is stronger than darkness, Truth is stronger than lies.

From Advent to Christmas

A series for Home Worship in December 2020 by Alan Misson

Christmas Day or Sunday 27th December

The Christmas Crib

Suggested reading: Luke 2:1-40; Matthew 2; Arcana Caelestia 10252:5-6

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”
Luke 2:11-12

At Christmas many churches display a traditional Christmas Crib in which Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus are surrounded by shepherds and kings as well as various animals. Of course it is very unlikely that the shepherds would have been there with the kings, but that doesn't really matter. This reflection takes the form of a meditation on a crib scene, giving the opportunity to look at it from a new and different perspective, by seeing it as a wonderful spiritual image of the way Jesus Christ can be born into our lives today rather than just as a picture of an event 2000 years ago.

So relax and bring into your mind and heart your favourite Christmas Crib scene.

First think about the manger in the centre of the crib. It is a place for animals to feed, perhaps horses but more likely for an ox or ass. The animals seek feed in the manger just as we need to seek spiritual nourishment and to understand Jesus and what he teaches. *Pause and take in this scene.*

Now look around your crib and see the sheep gathered together with their shepherds. The sheep are looked after by the shepherds and led to the manger. The sheep are the simple acts of goodness in our lives which must be present for Jesus to come alive within us. *Pause and take in this scene.*

Now concentrate on the shepherds. The shepherds have seen the angels and have come to find Jesus. They have brought with them all their sheep which they lovingly protect and care for even if they go astray. The shepherds are our desire to cherish goodness in our lives and direct it to serve others. *Pause and take in this scene.*

And now picture the kings, who have been led by a bright shining star to come to Bethlehem. They have travelled a long way to find Jesus because they know how important his birth is and they want to present their gifts to him. We can be kings when we allow the light of the Word to guide us and show us how Jesus can be truly born in our lives. *Pause and take in this scene.*

Finally look into your crib and see the gifts which the kings have brought, gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. There is gold, the love which we must bring to Jesus. There is frankincense, our faith in him. And there is myrrh, our obedience to what he teaches. *Pause and take in this scene.*

This Christmas Crib is a wonderful picture of all the feelings and thoughts that must be present in our hearts and minds if Jesus is to be truly born in our lives and begin the amazing transformation that only he can achieve.

“you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for coming into our world and being born as a baby in Bethlehem. Although the world around you was not ready to receive you, the place where you lay in a manger was perfectly prepared. I long for you to be born and re-born in my life – help me to prepare myself to receive your truth and your goodness and to care for these things in my life. May I be led by obedience and faith and love to put you above all things and to be led by you on the pathway you have prepared for me.