

Home Worship for October 2023

1st October

Pauline Grimshaw

Harvest and Rainbows

Read Genesis 8:15-22; 9:8-15 and Luke 8:1-8

I went to Tesco earlier this week and as I was leaving my car stopped at the traffic lights onto Long Causeway and there straight ahead of me, most unexpectedly, was a rainbow in the sky. I was feeling rather grumpy at the time, but when I saw the rainbow my mood lifted and the words of Wordsworth's poem 'My heart leaps up when I behold a rainbow in the sky' came into my mind followed by the words of God's promise to Noah: 'While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat and summer and winter and day and night shall not cease'. I was rapidly brought down to earth by the car behind me honking its horn!



I suppose because of the reading from Genesis I always associate harvest with rainbows and the promise that God made to Noah. The promise that whilst there is an earth, whatever man might do to spoil this earth, whilst it remains there will always be a seedtime and a harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter and day and night.

We usually think of harvest time and celebrate it as the end of the cycle of growth but in reality, it is only a part of the cycle, for a cycle has neither beginning nor ending. Our celebration of harvest today is rather different from the celebrations of previous years. Harvest presentations in church have changed in the past few years: we no longer enjoy the beauty or particularly the distinctive harvest smell of fruit and vegetables as we come into church on a Sunday morning. Instead we look at packets and tins and bottles - packaged and preserved in ways in which our ancestors could never have imagined. Yet without the raw materials of the vegetable kingdom as provided by the Lord whatever man produces is in vain.

This year as we celebrate harvest we remember too that without harvest there would be no springtime. Without the seeds and bulbs of this year's harvest there would be nothing to plant for next year's harvest. As we plant the bulbs, which come themselves from seeds and which are actually the storehouses of the plants grown from seeds, let us think of the miracle of

God's words to Noah and remember that although winter can seem bleak and dull, spring always comes and with it a new season of growth and harvest. Let us remember that although spring seems like a new beginning, a beginning is always built on what has gone before.

As with all that is written in the Word of the Lord there is a deeper and more spiritual meaning. In Luke's gospel the Lord told the story of the sower and what happened to the seed that was sown depending on the various places where it was scattered. It is obvious that this story deals with the reception of the truths of the Lord within our own lives. Every one of us receives truths or ideas from the Lord that flow into our minds. Every act of kindness or goodness done in this world is the result of seeds sown into our minds, whether the individual recognises it or not.

We can read in Arcana Caelestia 932:2 "Without this implanting of seed from the Lord nobody can do the least good thing. Every good that stems from charity ... is seed obtained from the Lord." Of course, seeds don't always fall on fertile ground, which happens when are not receptive to the Lord.

As with the growing of plants, we need both rain and sunshine to have a rainbow. Rainbows are formed when sunlight is scattered from raindrops into the eyes of an observer. We may not always like to have the rain, but without it, seeds could not grow. In the same vein, we cannot do anything without the Lord. Only when we acknowledge His influence in our lives can we grow and develop spiritually. And then our lives can be transformed as we become the angelic humans we are capable of being.

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, help us to be receptive to Your influence in order that the truths that You provide us with take root and grow. May those truths work their transforming power in our lives to help grow Your kingdom here on earth. Amen

8th October

Weather: Rain and Floods

Read Genesis 6:5-13; Deuteronomy; Matthew 7:24-27

Weather it seems to have been a prime topic of conversation recently. First of all we had a spell of glorious hot and sunny weather but since then we seem to have had a prolonged spell of dismal rainy weather. We grumbled firstly over a lack of rain and then grumbled again over too much rain! We have seen varying scenes of weather on television, harrowing scenes of drought in some countries and harrowing scenes of floods in others. Whether we have too much water or too little water we tend to attribute it to global warming and its effects on global weather patterns.

Rain and water are vital to all human beings. Water is constantly circulating around our bodies, which are themselves largely composed of water. Water refreshes us when we are thirsty and cleans and revives us when we are hot tired. Doctors and dieticians stress the advisability for us to drink more water to keep the cells in our bodies hydrated.

Just as water is constantly circulating around our bodies, water is constantly circulating around our world. Water falls to earth as snow or rain and then runs through brooks, streams and rivers into the seas, eventually evaporating back into the sky where it is gradually drawn up into clouds which then fall back down to earth as rain and so the whole process begins again. What a wonderful picture and process the circulation of water actually is UNTIL THINGS GO WRONG as in the past few months when we have seen devastating floods in many parts of the world even in countries that are usually hot, dry and not usually prone to flooding.

When we consider rain and water within the Word of the Lord, we should remember that it corresponds to or paints a spiritual picture within ourselves. In the Word of the Lord, we should remember, particularly in the New Testament we usually think of water as having a good meaning or correspondence. We might think of bodily washing-perhaps of the Lord washing the feet of his disciples or perhaps we might think of the bodily washing of baptism- the washing away and cleansing of selfish or untrue desires.

Just as water satisfies our natural thirst so the water of truth in the Word of the Lord refreshes, stirs and stimulates our souls. In the reading from Deuteronomy we hear how the truths of the Lord's Word drop gently as the dew and showers upon us. This idyllic picture of gentleness bears little resemblance to raging torrents and howling winds that we sometimes see portrayed on television. The torrents and rising floodwaters that destroy lives and property are depicted in the Word of the Lord in the story in Genesis 6 – the beginning of the story of Noah.

Whether or not the flood actually took place is neither here nor there for the story itself is a parable and the important thing is the correspondence contained within the story and its implications in our own lives. In the inner language of the Word correspondences often have opposing good or bad meanings. For example water in its beneficial sense means truth but in its opposite sense it means evil or false ideas that can wash away all the good things in our mind and refuse to go away. Perhaps we can see this in regard to the internet where people can dwell on undesirable images and evil perversions such as paedophilia which at times threatens to sweep away human decency.

In the Biblical story of Noah, the floods eventually die down and normal life has to be re-built, often slowly and painfully. Spiritually speaking we all spend time battling against and threatening to be overcome by evils and temptations but eventually we pass through these states and begin to rebuild our spiritual lives and characters anew.

We pray that the Lord will be with all those people who have suffered from either too much or too little water that the will be given strength and faith to rebuild their natural lives.

Matthew 7:26-27: "But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

I don't think it's heavily advertised on television: it's not sold in fancy packaging and it often gets a bad press amongst dieters. It is your average sliced loaf- it isn't fancy but it's a basic item in the shopping lists of most households in this country. Stick it in a toaster and then serve with baked beans or scrambled eggs or cheese for a quick hot snack. Eat two slices sandwiched together with jam and butter or any other filling you can think of and it makes a quick fix, convenient meal with little washing-up to cope with. In today's supermarkets you can buy bread products from all over the world-Indian Naan bread, French Brioches, Mexican taco wraps-the list is endless. Wherever you go in the world, bread of some kind is what used to be called a staple food -cheap, nutritious and filling food. Better still, homemade bread of some kind is also delicious and smells really wonderful-an experience that we miss when we only eat factory-made bread.

Bread is made from the seeds or grains of certain grasses and it is one of the earliest foods known to mankind. An offering of grain is an essential part of the story of Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis. A basic bread is made from the crushed grains of the grasses with the addition of water, a little fat and a pinch of salt. In biblical times two kinds of cereal plants were used to make bread, either barley, which made a fairly coarse bread and was usually eaten by the poorer people or wheat which made a finer bread and was usually eaten by the better off people. Making the bread even after the crop was sown, grown and harvested was quite a long process requiring a lot of effort. After the corn was harvested it had to be threshed or winnowed to separate the grains from their outer covering and sifted to remove the stalks before being crushed or ground into powder between large stones. This was usually the woman's job.

In biblical times the ploughing of fields and the planting of wheat and barley took place in October and November and the grain harvest in April, May and June - rather earlier than harvests in this country. From the earliest days the Israelites set aside festival times for giving thanks to and worshipping God and presenting Him with offerings of first fruits. The festival of first fruits of the grain was held on the last day of the Passover festival when a sheaf of the barley harvest was presented to God. Seven weeks later at Pentecost the grain harvest festival was celebrated. Finally, in the autumn the festival of 'Ingathering' or 'Tabernacles' was held after the fruit harvest was gathered in. The people of those days recognised how much work was needed to produce food but also how dependent they were on weather conditions-too much or too little rain could spell disaster or famine. Small wonder then that they felt gratitude when harvests were good.

When the Lord lived on earth he used parables to teach people. Parables are stories which use everyday situations to illustrate spiritual truths. Many of the parables the Lord used were about crops growing and were easily understood by the people he talked to in a way that we would probably not find so receptive today when our experiences of life are so totally different. Yet, within the literal sense of the stories, is a deeper spiritual sense which is revealed in the Writings of our church. Things that apply in this natural world also apply in the world of our mind or our spirit and correspond to our inner spiritual lives.

Take for example the growing of grain for bread. To get a worthwhile crop of corn, the plants or seeds have to be grown close together. As the crop grows the individual stalks by their compactness protect and shield the individual plant as it grows. The resulting seeds or fruit of the grass are small and hard unlike the fruit that grows on bushes and trees which tend to be large, sweet and juicy. Amazingly those small hard grains that cost so much effort are the things that fill us up and make us feel satisfied.

The more spectacular fruits of larger plants, though they contain some essential vitamins, also contain sugar and certainly do not have the properties of satisfying us in the same way that bread does.

In our own lives the things that we do are in a sense the fruits of our lives- the things that we do from our own understanding of truth and our love for others. We might do some spectacular acts of kindness or goodness in our lives but most of the time our daily lives are filled with the small everyday things that make up the routines of our daily living. It is perhaps the small things of life that are the most important and it is the sum of so many small things that make us the people that we are. These things are the acts of kindness that we show others, the little courtesies that oil the wheels of everyday life, the things that we don't really want to do but which nevertheless we carry out faithfully and well. A life lived in this way is a life of love that leaves us feeling full and contented.

In the reading from John's gospel the Lord compares himself to the bread that comes down from heaven. Just as he literally fed crowds of people, he also feeds us all spiritually. The food that he feeds us with is the truth contained in his Word in which he reveals himself. Like grains in cereal crops the truth can be hard to digest and put into use. It is not over sweet or over rich- it can at times be hard to digest but the love he shows sustains us, satisfies us and nourishes us.

We have seen many pictures on TV over the years of refugees calling out food and aid. As individuals we cannot know what should be done on a global scale to address these problems and neither have we the individual means to do so. Perhaps giving to the appropriate charities and organisations is the only practical way in which we might feel we can help others. Yet we can all pray that the hearts and minds of rulers and governments might be turned away from violence and killing into ways of peacefulness. As we celebrate harvest, we should be truly thankful and express our gratitude to the Lord for all the good things that we ourselves have. He truly is the bread that comes down from heaven and feeds our souls.

“We thank thee, then, O Father, For all things bright and good, The
seedtime and the Harvest, Our life, our health, our food.
Accept the gifts we offer, For all thy love imparts;
And what Thou most desirest, Our humble thankful hearts.”

Read Genesis 8:22; Exodus 23:16; Luke 8:5-12

Harvest time as we know it and as we celebrate it in churches today stems from a service of Harvest Thanksgiving instituted by Rev Robert Hawker, who was the Anglican vicar of the parish of Morenstowe in Cornwall. Hawker who was a Cornish patriot and poet, thought that as well the villagers celebrating the more pagan aspects of harvest they should also offer gifts of their own home-grown local produce to the Lord for the benefit of the poor.

But Hawker was only reviving a tradition that had its roots in the Old Testament as far back as the early chapters of Genesis when Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the Lord. A little further on in Genesis we read of the Lord's promise to Noah: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease."

In the book of Exodus, as well as the more familiar ten commandments the Lord also gave Moses other laws that the Israelites were commanded to obey. In our reading from Exodus we were told that a ceremony should be held to celebrate the gathering of the first fruits, the first crops that the fields produced at the beginning of the year. The first sheaf of the barley harvest was presented to the lord on the final day of the Passover festival. This would around the middle of April in our months.

In the autumn was held the feast or festival of 'ingathering,' the most popular and joyful of all the Israelitish celebrations. This was held in the autumn when all the fruit crops had been gathered. Celebrations included sleeping out in gardens in huts made from branches of trees. Today this festival is celebrated September although it does vary a little with the phases of the moon. In certain parts of Manchester these booths or huts can still be seen today.

These days our lives and the food that we eat are frequently divorced from where the food is grown. Much of our food is altered out of all recognition in shape, taste and texture. Many children today do not realise that foods such as Weetabix, crisps and chocolate biscuits come from plants that were once growing. In bygone days people realised that they might be very hungry indeed by the time of the next harvest of first fruits. I imagine that it must have been very hard for them to give the first fruits of their labours as a thanks offering to the Lord.

Until recently people had always to work hard to get food. Growing food was time consuming and required a great deal of effort. Sometimes the efforts of farmers would be frustrated by flood or drought, by weather that was too hot or too cold, by insects and animals and by enemies who destroyed them. Truly growing crops must have convinced the ancient Israelites of the power of God to punish or to bless. Today of course we know that God does not use the forces of nature to either punish or reward people.

In our natural world the growing and harvesting of crops underpins the whole of human activity. The hymns we sing and the readings that we hear all paint a picture of the things that are taking place within our own lives. During our lives on earth we are growing and developing spiritually as well as physically. Our spiritual crop is the things that we have done for others in the course of our lives, not for our benefit but for the sake of others. It is the effort that we make to become more like the Lord our Creator. Hopefully by the things that we have learnt and come to love our lives will be like the crop that brings forth one hundred- fold. May the Lord truly bless and bring forth our own spiritual harvests of lives well lived.

Read Isaiah 55:1 and 10-13; Mark 4:26-34

At this time of year, we thank the Lord for the bounty of food farmers have grown and been able to harvest. Let's think about how this food starts off: as seeds. It is amazing to compare the size of a butternut squash with that of a mustard seed. A mustard seed is absolutely tiny!

I've been researching how seeds grow into plants. It is like magic! All of the plants we have around us start life as seeds. Without seeds, there would be no plants and life on Earth as we know it would not be present. Even though most are small, seeds contain food and all the instructions necessary to spring into life as a plant.

It is incredible to imagine that a tiny, tiny mustard seed has the ability to grow into such a big tree, and that it has within it what it needs to grow, with the addition of light and water. If all of us planted a mustard seed, we would have differing results as to how well they would grow. We can't force plants to grow, and sometimes they don't grow as well as we think they should, even if we have planted them in optimum conditions and given them tender loving care. Even professional gardeners have more success with some plants than others.

Jesus told His disciples this story as part of a parable. We've talked about parables before, and wondered why Jesus didn't just spell things out clearly. Well, there are some very good reasons for this. We can view the whole Bible as a parable, telling stories that we can learn from. By listening to parables, rather than being able to clearly understand what is being said, the Lord is protecting us. What happens if we're told something straight and we don't want to do it? At times, we don't – that's all of us, not just children!

Seeds represent the truths we learn from the Word of God. If we were told a truth and we came to accept it as true, and then disobeyed it, we would be committing a sin – we would know what we were doing was wrong. The Lord protects us from this by only letting us understand what we are ready for, and what we are prepared to put into action. I'm sure that many of us will have come to a passage from the Word and realised it meant more to them than it did the last time they read it. With parables, we can remember these stories that we learnt as children. We think that they are talking about someone else, but, as time goes by, we realise that actually, they are about us.

If we are willing to follow the Lord and do as He teaches, the seeds of truth within us begin to grow. We may not realise it at first. It is the Lord that is responsible for this growth. If we want to use what we learn for the benefit of serving the Lord and other people, the Lord allows us further understanding and enlightenment. Like a plant, the truth is growing. If we are only thinking in a selfish way about how we can improve life for ourselves, we are kept at a lesser level of understanding so that we do not distort the truths that are present within us.

When we do something for others, we often get that reward of warmth inside. However, sometimes we all have to do things that we don't want to because we know it is the right thing to do. There is growth wherever the Lord is present, even if the start of it seems tiny. Having some good intentions and recognising that it is the Lord who is doing the real work, even if we feed and water those intentions, is the key. When we think we are doing it alone and inwardly take the credit for our newfound "goodness", we stop the Lord from being able to grow the seed.

So, when we look at the abundance of food grown on our green and pleasant land at this time of year, may we find ourselves remembering that even the briefest experience of a truth can grow and prosper when we allow the Lord to do His work.

Blessing: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift His countenance on you, and give you peace. Amen

Home Worship for 2023 by Revd. Helen Brown

Healing Stories: Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. Psalm 30:2

Sunday 5th November: Please read: John 9

Inner Blindness

We are presented at the beginning of this chapter with a man born blind. This story shows us the variety of ways our human limitations can act as spiritual blindness. Physical blindness means existing in perpetual darkness for we who can see in a physical sense it is difficult to appreciate what this is like. Helen Keller contrasts this with a lack of vision in the following quote – “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.” Vision is what the Lord can give us when we are open to his healing of our spiritual blindness.

Often it is only with hindsight we realise how we have been spiritually blind in the past. But at the time we could not clearly see the truth of the situation. Seeing corresponds to understanding, we say ‘I see’ when we have understood the point that someone is making.

In this story the actual healing is a catalyst that creates a variety of reactions. As we read, we find different groups of people asking questions and demonstrating different human reactions to the act of spiritual transformation that is depicted in the healing of spiritual blindness. If we reflect on the reactions of the disciples, the neighbours, and the Pharisees we can see the variety of limited human perspectives that focus their own particular agenda. Each of these is a form of spiritual blindness. Furthermore, the man born blind does not recognize who has healed him until after the event. And in this realisation, he worships the Lord as his Saviour. Do we acknowledge the Lord’s hidden healing work in our depths in each moment? Or can this reality only dawn with hindsight?

When you read this story, notice the questions being asked because this gives an insight into what the motivation is behind the question. This shows us the traps or forms of spiritual blindness we can fall into. The first question comes from the disciples:

His disciples asked him, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

We can see in this question the underlying assumption that dis-ease is a consequence of sin or human error. Yes, we do bring consequences on ourselves by our choices in adult life. We make a poor decision and must live with the outcome of it. But this man was born blind - we are all born spiritually blind, we are ignorant of the Lord and his ways. As it says earlier in John’s gospel we are to be born again - created anew on a spiritual level. This is how it is; no one is to blame or has sinned or has caused this. It is so, because, as Jesus replies:

“Neither this man nor his parents sinned,” said Jesus,
“but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.”

What is the work of God? It is the way of Love, he yearns to transform our lives, to give his blessings of peace and joy and life everlasting. But he cannot do so if we remain blind, full of spiritual dis-ease. I quote from 12 Miracles of Spiritual Growth by E. Kent Rogers:

Everything is in and of God, and so everything is ultimately good. Hell is simply an inability to see reality as it is. Life is the ever-unfolding manifestation of Divine Love.

Prayer: Dear Lord, May we, in humility, know that we cannot judge or blame any person. We ask that our blindness be healed so that we can see the power of Divine Love working in our life. And so, we can echo the words of the blind man and say; “One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”. Amen

Home Worship for 2023 by Revd. Helen Brown

Healing Stories: Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. Psalm 30:2

Sunday 12th November: Please read: Luke 5: 17 -26

Getting Stuck

Our reading focuses on the healing of the paralysed man. It is interesting that this story is repeated in Matthew and Mark as well. There is no doubt that must be an underlying reason for this repetition. Perhaps in our spiritual development we need to hear this several times to deepen our appreciation of how the Lord heals us and makes us whole. In life with its challenges and conflicts we often have times when we feel disconnected from the Lord. Perhaps we experience being stuck, downhearted, fearful, or confused. Be reassured that this is a valuable learning experience, and this healing focuses our attention on what brings about a release from this inner state.

Everything we read in this story is a mirror or corresponds to our own inner spiritual development. To be paralysed is to be rendered immobile. Spiritually it is not possible to walk, move forward, instead we are stuck in familiar ways of dealing with life and our usual way of reacting.

The paralysed man was sick on his bed. The 'bed' symbolises what our inner life 'rests on' or is supported by. We rest on the spiritual principles or values that we trust and have faith in. For example, to love our neighbour is a foundation belief found in all faiths and may be a foundation truth that guides our choices in life.

What are your core and/or foundational spiritual beliefs that support your spiritual path?

In the story four friends take the man to Jesus, but the way into the house is blocked by crowds. Our minds are often crowded with thoughts that can be a barrier to our reconnection with the Lord.

A different approach is needed. The four friends take the man up to the rooftop of the house. In the Middle East at this time, rooftops were used for walking, meditation and prayer. Of course, the rooftop also provides a higher view point or perspective. This quote explains the significance of this:

The roof of a house is its highest point, and the part most exposed to the sun. So it makes sense that in the Bible, "roof" represents what is inmost in a person – the part that is closest and most in contact with the Lord. Swedenborg also notes that this inmost part is, in everyone, a love or affection rather than a truth or idea. This makes sense if you think about it:our character is ultimately a matter of what we care about, not what we think. Following this, then, "roof" represents our most deeply felt affection for what is good and true.

New Christian Bible Study

It is the intervention of the four friends that create this turning point enabling healing to take place. And four is a balanced energy. Of course, the four friends are also aspects of our inner self. These are the experiences and beliefs that have previously been supportive in our spiritual journey.

When we choose to come out of focussing on the understanding of the mind alone and move to enter our heart to live out our core spiritual beliefs then this brings us to our Divine Healer. Then we can take up our bed (our spiritual beliefs) and once again walk the spiritual path in life.

Prayer – Dear Lord, We come with grateful hearts because you love us no matter how far we have strayed from your path. We come knowing that you forgive our fickleness, and once again place our feet on a secure path. You lift us out of what seems overwhelming and make all things possible. Amen

Home Worship for 2023 by Revd. Helen Brown

Healing Stories: Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. Psalm 30:2

Sunday 19th November: Please read: Mark 7:31 -36

Being Deaf

This healing miracle in Mark's gospel concerning the man both deaf and mute. At the heart of this healing is the word "Ephphatha!" which is an Aramaic word meaning "Be opened!". How does this relate to us I wonder? By way of contrast, we have the phrase 'it fell on deaf ears' ... can we recall times when we didn't want to hear or be told the truth of the matter or a situation. We might hear the words, but our mind and heart are closed. Fortunately, our Lord knows us intimately and knows when we are open to receive what will make us whole and truly alive. And knowing this he provides opportunities for us to be touch in our heart as well as enlighten our mind as to what is true.

The healing of the deaf and mute man takes place in the area of the Decapolis, which was where the Gentiles were in the majority, and here Jesus healed all kinds of sicknesses. The Gentiles in the gospels are depicted as being outside the Jewish faith. If we relate this to ourselves, we might think about those aspects of our life that are detached or isolated from the Lord's life and spirit. In our everyday outer life there maybe situations or decisions which we don't allow the Lord to influence. Do we ask or allow the Lord to influence or guide what we focus on? This healing shows us that the Lord yearns to make all aspects of our life whole, if we choose to allow him to show us what is sick and dis-eased.

Unlike other healings where Jesus says, 'your faith has made you whole', this healing is about the Lord engaging with us in a very intimate way - by touch. Touch conveys love, the sphere, the outgoing spirit. It is the very opposite of being detached and isolated. Are we ready to allow the Lord to touch us, and pour his spirit into our lives? Can we bear being that open to him? For this is to be vulnerable and open, rather than our usual reaction which is to protect what is ours and keep it from the light of truth. For it will involve change, it will involve letting go of what we hold to be ours, the things we believe we own.

In many places in the Bible being blind and deaf are mentioned together; -

Bring out the blind people who have eyes, And the deaf who have ears. Isaiah 43:8

We need to learn and understand what is true to see clearly and allow the light of truth to dispel our clouded thinking and the darkness of confusion. When light comes and shines into our minds, we can see what is false, we are lifted up into the light of heaven. We learn by experience that there is only one source of spiritual power, only one who can heal - the Lord of Love. In a physical sense a deaf person cannot hear properly and therefore cannot speak easily, fluently, as a hearing person would do. If we relate this to spiritual deafness, if we don't hear to the truth the Lord can show us, because we don't listen to him, or simply ask him, then we cannot speak the truth.

If we attempt to speak on a spiritual level, it can only come from our limited perspective which relates only to what we want for ourselves or what the outer world values. Because alone we humans cannot see the bigger picture, can only view what is a short-term fix or solution. When we are allowing the Lord to heal our spiritual deafness then we can 'speak plainly'. For then our halting speech can clearly express the Lord's truth and love and the way we live can express his healing power in our lives as we are enabled to show forth his presence and spirit within us. Then we can say wholeheartedly 'Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done'.

Prayer - Dear Lord, We thank you for the assurance of your constant presence, the steadfastness of your love and compassion and the enduring quality of your truth to guide our steps. May that truth equip us with courage to step out into the unknown, to follow wherever you lead us, trusting in your path. Amen

Home Worship for 2023 by Revd. Helen Brown

Healing Stories: Lord my God, I called to you for help, and you healed me. Psalm 30:2

Sunday 26th November: Please read: Mark 3:1-6

Powerlessness

Our previous reading focused our attention on the power of Jesus's touch to heal our spiritual dis-ease and so enable us to speak his truth. In today's reading we discover what is needed for us to be the Lord's hands in our world and bring his love to others.

This healing highlights our own powerlessness indicated by the shrivelled or withered hand which cannot be of use and so serve the Lord's kingdom of heaven. Hands in the Bible represent the power of spiritual good, which is the love of others and serving others. It is love in action expressed through an understanding and knowledge of what it is to love and serve others.

Notice that this healing takes place on the Sabbath. The 3rd commandment of the 10 commandments concerns the keeping of the Sabbath day and not doing work on this day. In spiritual terms the Sabbath is the experience of coming into connection with the Lord and having peace as a result, because we are then safe from hellish influences. The Sabbath is an inner state of rest and peace. It is also an inner state of the union of what we know to be true and good. Then, and only then, we are open to receive the Lord's loving goodness which flows into service to others.

Spiritually, if we work on the Sabbath day, we are working or living from ourselves, following our will, our agenda, and our perspective. The negative influences from the hells flow in and tempt us to not trust in the power of the Lord in our lives or other people's. We experience doubt and even try to silence the voice of truth because it shows us how we have failed in living our faith. This is the opposite of working for the Lord and his purposes. We see this attitude played out in the Pharisees who, in the story embody a conflicting viewpoint.

The Pharisees challenge Jesus concerning healing on the Sabbath. The Pharisees kept to the letter of the law and to use this to be in control. This attitude or state of mind is critical of activities that might be against the truth. We can use the truth to justify our perspective and defend ourselves from seeing that we need to change. In this we lose sight of the fact the truth's priority is to show us how to serve others so that they experience the Lord's loving goodness. Instead, we are seeing situations or relationships from our own perspective not the Lord's. We are blinkered and keep to the letter of the law rather than its spirit. Truth alone rules rather than serving the intention of goodness.

We need to become aware of this tendency ruling within our mind. In so doing, we recognise the withered state of our effectiveness to live out the Lord's quality of life and actively touch other's lives. To recognise this tendency or temptation is part of the process of regeneration. And although it is uncomfortable and even painful, it brings into sharp focus what our life is like without the Lord's influence. In fact, it teaches us humility as we see and experience the difference between when we are turned away from the Lord, and we turn our face towards him. Needless to say, the Lord's face is always turned towards us.

The Lord says to each of us "Stretch out your hand". The power to love others is Jesus' love coming into the everyday and even mundane activity of our lives. Are we open to receive it?

Prayer - Dear Lord, Your hands that create and mould us, express your Love for all people. Your hands comfort and bind up our inner wounds. Your hands heal and make us whole. Your hands create a new heart within us. May we be open to Your touch and serve Your kingdom of heaven. Amen

December 3rd (Advent Sunday) "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." John 15:9

Isn't it interesting how various groups of people and even individuals see God in very different ways? A survey taken some years ago in the United States showed that 90% of people believe in God, yet only 20% attended a church! For us Christians, God is our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. But even within the Christian church, where the Word of God is, there are vast differences in how we see God.

In looking outside the church for evidence that God exists I find one helpful source to be the reports from those who have experienced a "Near Death Experience" (NDE) Or, sometimes it's known as an "Out of Body Experience (OBE). It's an experience which is often recounted by people who have apparently died, but are then resuscitated. Or, in the case of an OBE, they have somehow left their physical body. 1 in 8 of the population has apparently experienced either one, or both. Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) claimed to have experienced such for 26 years of his life (see Arcana Celestia 3346), with the exception that he was simultaneously still fully conscious in this world! And what is more, some of his writings bear a very remarkable resemblance to the modern stories told by those claiming to have had a NDE's, or OBE's (see Heaven And Hell 461, 493, The Heavenly City 225, The Last Judgement (Continuation) #6). It seems that these experiences, along with Swedenborg's writings, can offer a great deal of insight into the afterlife. For example, Swedenborg tells us how God "is Innocence itself" (Conjugal Love, par. 395). So, the lovely innocence we see coming through little children, for example, that same innocence which causes us to love and want to protect and nurture them, is God Himself shining through them! The reported events coming from people after having the NDE would appear to support this idea.

The term NDE was coined by the philosopher, psychologist, physician and author Dr. Raymond Moody (see his book "Life after life" published in 1975). He was the first to research the collective NDE experience, interviewing a total of one hundred NDE patients and presenting a summary of his findings. These findings show a remarkable degree of consistency in each individual account. For example, many of the patients reported meeting friends and relatives who had passed on before them. Most encountered a being of light who omitted intense feelings of unconditional love, innocence and understanding. For most these experiences were life changing events and almost all reported losing their fear of death completely. So, where could we look to reconcile the events experienced during the NDE with what the church teaches about God from the Holy Bible?

The writings of Emanuel Swedenborg give us a deep insight into the NDE experience. In his book "Heaven and Hell (published in 1758) Swedenborg records in remarkable detail things heard and seen during his time exploring the next life. But more, he actually goes on to describe the very nature of God Himself (see Heaven And Hell 125, Divine Love And Wisdom 54, 64). That He is pure infinite love and wisdom and how all this knowledge is contained within a spiritual meaning within the Holy bible; and that the literal meaning is for and about this world with the inner spiritual meaning being for and about the next life (see The New Jerusalem And Its Heavenly Teachings 36, True Christianity 401, Secrets Of Heaven 2990) knowledge which Swedenborg tells us has now been revealed! Further, Swedenborg explains how our creator assumed a human body by being born on earth and living a life in this world, as we do. He gave his life for us so that, among other things, we would know that a life exists beyond this temporary world. He who is love and wisdom asks us to follow His example so he can make his second advent within us and lead us to look beyond the things of this temporary world. He also tells us how to achieve this, by saying: "A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." John 15:9.

Prayer: loving and gracious Lord, save us from ourselves and from investing all our time and energy in the things of this temporary world. Help us instead to come more and more to appreciate the spiritual gifts which you freely and gladly give to all those who ask, seek and knock. Amen

December 10th

How quickly a year goes in! Why does Christmas seem to come around quicker as the year's role on? At the time of writing, I'm beginning to sense the excitement building as we prepare to celebrate the coming into the world of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, both in historic terms and also in the here and now.

Recently I found myself thinking about the overall influence the Christmas message has had on this world. It may be impossible to quantify, but I can at least say for certain that it has had a profound influence on my own life and the life of those around me. When we think of the humble beginnings of the Christmas message in that small stable in Bethlehem (Luke 2:4-7) and the way the Christian message grew and spread around the world, we can see how the Lord's life and teaching has helped shape the world we live in. In Isaiah 9:6-7 we read: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder, and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God, Hero, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace. Of the multiplication of His government and peace there shall be no end; It's easy for us to look at the decline in numbers of those attending Church and take it as a sign the Lord's influence in our world is also in decline.

However, it's worth stepping back and looking at how knowledge of the Lord has gradually increased over the past two thousand years. The above verse from Isaiah reminds us that our God was born on earth and "Of the multiplication of His government and peace there shall be no end". When we read the Lord's Word we can get occasional glimpses of the spiritual meaning within it. These wonderful revelations remind us that the Lord lives, He is real! When we see these truths shining through the Word and live our lives according to them, the Lord then influences our world. The efforts we make allow the Lord to bring His joy and peace into our lives, which in turn influences the world around us. Because He was born into the world and defeated the hells, the Lord can now be born in us, so we can call on His strength to fight the hells within us.

At times it can be difficult to love the people around us, but when we manage to overcome our own tendency to be self-centred and allow the Lord in, then His influence on our lives increases. Even once the trials of this world are far behind us the Lord's influence will continue to grow in us and it's to the extent the Lord governs our lives that we will see Him also in all those around us; in the book Heaven and Hell 55 we read; "all receive the heaven that is outside them in accordance with the quality of the heaven within them, so in like manner do they receive the Lord since the Divine of the Lord makes heaven". We just need to think about the joyful things Christmas brings; family reunions, giving and receiving gifts, excited children, gathering for Christmas dinner and the increase of love and good will all around us. These things allow us to see just how blessed we are when we allow the Lord to govern our world. As His influence continues to grow within us, our ability to see Him in all those around us will also grow and the peaceful influence of the Lord's birth will be multiplied in our hearts forever! "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given...of the multiplication of His government and peace there shall be no end".

Prayer: Loving Saviour, who brings love and light into an otherwise cold and dark world, we ask you for a discerning heart to be able to recognise your presence in all things. Help us to count our blessings daily that we will come to know and appreciate more all that you do for us as we go about our daily lives. May the Christmas season be a constant reminder to us of the sacrifices you made on our behalf that we too may be willing and ready to take up our cross and follow you. Amen.

December 17th

It seems almost beyond belief the way in which the Lord was born on this earth and no preparations had been made for His arrival, even though His coming was predicted throughout scripture. As we know, the Lord's birth took place in humble circumstances. We assume it was in a stable because we read that He was laid in a manger Luke 2:7.

It seems very odd the way that the church of the day rejected the Lord as the saviour, considering all that is written about it, as for example in Isaiah 7:14, 9:6. We also read in Matt. 2:3-5 that when Herod wanted to find out where the Messiah was to be born, the Chief Priests informed him by Quoting from Micah 5:2. I guess it could be said that the church rejected the Lord because they were expecting a "Worrier King" like king David for example: one who was expected to come and fight to free them from Roman rule. But, then again, would such a saviour be said to "shepherd His people" or be called "the Prince of Peace"? It's clear that there was evidence enough for them to accept the Lord as the predicted Messiah if they wished. This makes the rejection all the more shocking. It appears that instead of using the predictions in the prophets to welcome and prepare for our Lord and Saviour's arrival, the leaders in Jerusalem used them to try to prevent His advent.

Swedenborg explains that there was at that time, no place of spiritual instruction left on earth, due to the total adulteration of the Word. And that this is what is meant by there being "no room at the Inn". (see Apocalypse Explained 706[12]) This is the signification of "inn" also in Luke 10:34; 22:11; Mark 14:14; and elsewhere. Swedenborg also wrote in a letter to Beyer, Stockholm, February 1767, that there being no room at the inn signified that there was no place of instruction in Jerusalem, for which reason it is said to the shepherds, who signified the coming Church "This shall be the sign unto you; ye shall find the babe lying in a manger" (Luke 2: 12). The Lord's timing was perfect of course. If not for the Lord's birth at that precise time and in that precise way, the connection between heaven and earth would have been lost. This indeed should make our approach to Christmas a time of even greater rejoicing. Of course, it commemorates the time of the Lord's birth on this earth. But it also represents a turning point in history at the very time when the interior of the Word was no longer known. Our Lord came to replace the representative church as the outer expression of the Divine love by glorifying His human. That's why in John 1:14 we read "the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us". (see True Christian Religion 261).

So, now this great work which the Lord did while on earth can happen within each one of us personally, to all who approach the Lord. The Lord's birth took place when there was no room at the Inn (Luke 2:7) because there was nowhere left where spiritual truth could be manifested or received and the Lord's love along with it. Being born in a manger, a place where horses feed from, means that the Lord Himself can now spiritually feed all who approach Him. John 6:35 "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry". Christmas is an opportunity for us to be open to the Lord being born into our world. We know the message and we can go to Him in that humble place where we can receive spiritual nourishment. Christmas then is a time for added commitment to the values we hold dear and a chance to spread the Christmas message as a new birthing of love, tolerance and forgiveness to all into our world. We can look to the life the Lord led and seek to follow His example. It's a time when the angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds out in the fields, calling those who seek to lead people to heaven, to come and be nourished in spirit and see the "good news of great joy that will be for all people" Luke 2:10 (Additional references: (DE VERBO 7:5). Apocalypse Explained 373 Dan. 2:43,44 & 7:13,14 Is. 25:9, 7:14, 9:6 Jer. 23:5 Zech. 9:9, 2:10 Mic. 5:2 Mal. 4:5)

Prayer: Lord our God, thank you that you were born on earth as one of us and that you can now reach everyone who calls on your name with your infinite and everlasting love. Bring peace into my heart and the light of truth into my understanding at this season of good will to all people, Amen.

December 25th (Christmas Day!) Happy Christmas! What a wonderful day it is and what wonderful news was to be proclaimed in every land. The following readings are arranged in chronological order so that the reader may have as full a picture as possible of how the greatest event in human history unfolded. The references beneath point to the spiritual meaning of the various parts. I hope you enjoy looking through these and that it brings you a real sense of the Lord's glorious presence with you and may the Lord bless you on this special Day.

Isaiah 9:2, 6, 7, Mathew 1:18-25, Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-14, Luke 2:15-20, Matthew 2:1-12, John 1:1-14..... The Lord Himself is called a "little one" or "child" (Isa. 9:6), because He is innocence itself and love itself, and in the same passage He is spoken of as "Wonderful, Counsellor, God, Hero, Father of Eternity, Prince of Peace. Arcana Celestia (AC) 430 That the Divine Itself, which is called "Jehovah" and the "Father," and which is the Divine love, was in the Lord from conception, is evident in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke Apocalypse Explained (AE) 1069..... From these words it is evident what faith, or believing in Him, is, namely, that it is with those who receive Him and believe in Him, not from "the will of the flesh," nor from "the will of man." "The will of the flesh" is what is contrary to love and charity, for this is signified by "flesh" John 1:12,13, AC 1608..... For in Syria were the last remains of the Ancient Church, and therefore in that land there still remained the knowledges of good and truth, as can also be seen from Balaam, who not only adored Jehovah, but also prophesied concerning the Lord, and called Him the "Star out of Jacob, and the Sceptre out of Israel" (Num. 24:17) AC 3249.

Prayer: Dear Lord, we praise you for this season when so much good is manifested through so many. Help us to add to the festive cheer in any way we can, by living our faith and forsaking anything that would prevent your love and truth coming into the world. Teach us then, to obey you always that we will not succumb to the will of the flesh, but seek to do your will instead.

December 31st "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth" John 4:24

As we move into the new year of 2024 we may get to wondering that with all the uncertainty that modern life brings what lies ahead for our young people. With the decline of the church and the rise of corporate power, it seems that today, more than ever, our young people need to hear and benefit from the truths of faith. For many of us, it can be heart-breaking to witness the decline of Christian values and principles in what is an increasingly fast changing world. The older generations in particular can see the dangers, and feel their apparent helplessness and inadequacy through an inability to give future generations the benefits of their learning and experience. It can be frustrating, even painful, can't it? The impact on society from the rise of what we might call "Moral Relativism", and particularly the effects this is having on our young people, can leave one feeling almost depressed. Made all the worse, I think, for people who fail to see any providential element in this.

In despair of this we may turn to the heavenly doctrines for a New Church where we find that there is an infinite wisdom silently at work to continually turn all our mistakes and misadventures to everlasting good. The writings call this element of the Divine providence "Permissions". (regarding permission – see [Arcana Coelestia 7877\[5\]](#), [10778](#), [The New Jerusalem And Its Heavenly Teachings 272](#), [Divine Providence 81](#), [True Christianity 281\[6\]](#)). Having been involved with young people and having a shared responsibility for their spiritual welfare, for over 3 decades now, I have wrestled with the problem of moral relativism within myself for many years and how it is changing our culture and impacting on our young people. For example, I have found that the peer influence is just too strong to expect young people to be able to speak out overtly about their faith, nay, even unfair that we ask that of them.

One solution I have used, and which I have found helpful, is to draw on the Lord's words from John 4:24 "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth". They may not be able to use the Lord's actual name in their every-day interactions, but what they can do is use the principles the Lord teaches in their day to day lives (see- [The Doctrine of the Lord 50\[2\]](#)). Before they post on social media, for example, they could think "who am I doing this for and why"? I find that giving them ways to practice these privately within themselves, while being outwardly more discreet, at least gives them a chance to participate in and apply the teachings of the Lord's church in any given situation they may find themselves in.

After all, what is worship? Do we think it is merely visiting churches, kneeling before the Lord and so on? Or do we think it is more to do with what is motivating us and/or informing our understanding of what is good and true? (see -, [Arcana Coelestia 8254](#), [10143\[4\]](#), [10645\[2\]](#), [Divine Providence 137](#).) I am in no way saying that outwardly worshipping the Lord by attending church and bowing prayerfully together to express our love for the Lord is a bad thing, on the contrary, I often benefit from such things myself. But the writings simply tell us that this is not the most important aspect of our worship, as in the following from, "[A Brief Exposition Of New Church Doctrine](#)" [Par. 51](#) "From the Faith of the present Church there flows forth a worship of the mouth and not of the life; when yet the worship of the mouth is accepted by the Lord only so far as it accords with worship which is of the life".

Prayer: Dear Lord, as we move into another year, we ask that whenever the things of this world begin to drag us down, grant us the wisdom to lift our eyes to you and see in the light of your eternal providence, that we may then contemplate the same promises and reassurances that you gave to your disciples in John 16:33 "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world". Amen.