

23rd May 2021 – ‘Reopening with spirit’

led by Rev Kate Whyman

GATHERING MUSIC ‘Crossing the stone’, by Karl Jenkins, featuring Catrin Finch

<https://youtu.be/y8m4PqWU3p0>

WELCOME AND CHALICE LIGHTING

Good morning and welcome! Today I welcome those of you who are back in the church for the first time this year. It’s wonderful to see you again.

And I welcome, too, those of you joining us live on Zoom or Facebook, as well as those catching up later on YouTube. A special welcome to anyone joining us for the first time. The miracles of technology allow us all to be together in spirit, regardless of time or distance.

Let’s begin, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle. *And as always, I invite those of you at home, to light a candle with me if you would like to.*

May this flame be a sign of hope for our re-opening. As we open the doors of our church, may we continue also to open the doors of our hearts and minds. May we be open to each other, open to our god, and open to all that is, and will be, now and always. Amen

It feels like we have made many transitions since March 2020 – a lifetime ago - and now here is yet another one beginning. Perhaps you feel excited, or anxious about this. Or unsure maybe.

It is our intention that, from now on, we offer ‘blended’ worship. It’s simply what we do. It will take a little getting used to for us all, as does anything new. But I really hope we will all feel that this offers the best way forward. It allows us each to be present in our own way. It opens up the invitation to ‘Come, come whoever you are’ by extending our sacred space beyond these walls. It enables us to reach out and connect more widely and more generously, which can surely only be enriching for everyone...even if there are a few bumps in the road as we make our way. And no doubt there will be some of those!

So, let’s pray...

PRAYER by Frank Clabburn (I shared this prayer when we last reopened in September)

Spirit of Life.

Let us make this place a temple of the heart's desire;

Built from the hewn rocks of our individuality

And the sure mortar of our shared understandings.

Let us make it an unwalled, unbounded temple

Wherein all people may praise the highest things

that give life meaning and worth,

and draw us ever onward beyond our known selves.

Let us make of this place a centre of meeting for the lost and uncertain,

that we may gain renewed hope to face life's joys and sorrows with enterprise and

forbearance, and that we may know also a deep gratitude for all the opportunities of growing.

And let us make of this place a home in which dwell the spirit of love, peace and

understanding. In this deep covenant let us join, now, and for evermore.

Let it be so.

You might like to take a moment to reach up, and reach out, and stand up (if you're moved to do so). Doesn't it feel good to move? And to stretch? Outwards, and upwards, and beyond ourselves? I think this is what we're doing spiritually, too.

It also feels good to sing. And here you online are at an advantage. You can sing! We here will be listening. But this is a jolly, bouncy hymn. So if you want to sway, stand, clap, move, dance on the spot, tap your feet DO.

1st hymn: 33(P) Enter, rejoice and come in

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.

Today will be a joyful day;

enter, rejoice and come in.

Open you ears to the song.
Open your ears to the song.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Open your hearts everyone.
Open your hearts everyone.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Don't be afraid of some change.
Don't be afraid of some change.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice, and come in.

Enter, rejoice and come in.
Enter, rejoice and come in.
Today will be a joyful day;
enter, rejoice and come in.

Words and music by Louise Ruspini

STORY: 'Paradise found' (Retelling of a traditional Jewish story from *One Hundred More Wisdom Stories*, by Margaret Silf (**Read by Kathy**))

There was once a very discontented man, who wanted to discover the way to paradise but had so far had no luck. One day, after listening to the wisdom teacher talking about paradise, he decided to set off to find it.

It was a long trek. By the end of a long day's walk he seemed to be no closer than he had been at the start.

When night fell he lay down to sleep but, fearful that he would not remember in the morning which direction he had been heading in, he placed his shoes pointing in the right onward direction.

But in the night the trickster came by, and turned the man's shoes right round to point in the opposite direction.

When the man awoke, he put on his shoes, having noted the direction they were indicating, and set off again. Another long day's walk followed, and by nightfall he arrived at what had to be paradise. But it looked strangely familiar. It looked just like his own village. It looked just like his own house. And, sure enough, there was his wife cooking dinner for them both.

And he realized that he had discovered what he had set out to find.

READING: 'Out of the Spiritual Fog' by Alex Haider-Winnett

These days, if I'm awake after midnight it's because I'm rocking my baby back to sleep. But before my baby, it was probably because I was at a rock show.

A couple of years ago, I went to see one of my favorite bands in San Francisco. As the band played, the audience formed a writhing mass of humanity, moving and singing together as one. After the show ended, my friends and I wandered out to the street. My eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness and there was a constant ringing in my ears. Eventually I noticed that because we were all drenched in sweat, and in the foggy night, there were great plumes of steam coming off the top of our heads. It brought to mind the Pentecost story from the Christian Bible (Acts 2:1-4), where the Holy Spirit came upon the believers and flames erupted from their heads and everyone was able to understand each other despite nationality or language.

So much of my life is lived from the neck *up*. I think about office jobs I've had; classes I've taken; the humdrum routine of everyday where my body is little more than a vehicle for my brain. How distant I feel from the Divine in those situations, when everything is on autopilot and I'm moving absently through life. And how I need moments to shock me out of that mental and spiritual fog.

Direct experience of the Divine can't be merely conjured with the mind. It can be felt with our whole, beautiful, sacred bodies by clapping and singing and jumping up and down and crying and laughing and dancing.

God is not a distant force, far away. God is in the beating of our hearts and the backbeat of a funky baseline. God is in a 'four-on-the-floor' drum fill that makes us think *I'm so glad I woke up today*, and in the achy joints and sore muscles the day after. God was visible in the steam coming off the sweaty bodies that danced and celebrated together at a rock show.

2nd hymn: 11 (P) Blessed spirit of my life

Blessed spirit of my life,
give me strength through stress and strife;
help me live with dignity;
let me know serenity.
Fill me with a vision,
clear my mind of fear and confusion.
When my thoughts flow restlessly,
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,
hear the still, small voice in me.
Help me live my wordless creed
as I comfort those in need.
Fill me with compassion;
be the source of my intuition.
Then when life is done for me,
let love be my legacy.

Words and music by Shelley Jackson Denham

REFLECTION – Candles of joy and concern

This is a chance for silence and stillness. And to light a candle for a joy or sorrow.

INTERLUDE Still we rise, Elizabeth Hornby

<https://youtu.be/CnxAlnjmaU>

ADDRESS

Today is Pentecost in the Christian calendar, a festival which celebrates, as we heard in the reading earlier, the story in Acts which describes how the disciples and followers of Jesus were suddenly filled with the spirit - symbolised by wind and fire - and that as a result they were suddenly all able to understand each other, to speak the same language.

It's a wonderful idea to think that when we are genuinely filled with spirit we too might understand each other. In a sense then we too can 'speak the same language', not literally necessarily, but at a deep soul level. At such times we may recognize each other as being like different leaves on the same tree. Or different drops in the same ocean. The 'language' we speak together might be silence. It might be laughter or tears. It might be music or dance. When we are connected with the Divine, then the divisions, the prejudices, the judgments – they fall away and we may find we can suddenly see each other. Our humanity *and* our divinity. Paradise.

Because we're reopening the church today, I've been thinking about why we're here. Why have you come back today? Why have you tuned in from home? Why are you here?

It has been – and it still is – a strange, challenging and disconcerting time, and we've each experienced it differently. Of course we have. We experience *everything* differently, in our own unique way. But for some reason we are all here, now, if not in the same physical place, then still in the same ether. And so the question arises, why? What is it that has drawn us back again, or for the first time, today? What is the 'same language' we are speaking?

We know it isn't that we have the same beliefs. We do share many of the same values. But I think there is something deeper still that draws us back to – and I'll use the more old-fashioned term – that draws us back to worship.

Last week my friend – or I should say *our* friend - Stephen Crowther, who has taken services in Plymouth and I'm sure will again, he sent out an email to friends and colleagues asking what worship meant to them? He was prompted to ask, as we all embark upon this new blended worship, what is it we are doing? What IS worship?

I found myself answering that, for me, worship is about making space for our longing, our deep yearning to connect with our deepest selves, with each other, and with that which holds us all and is beyond naming.

And we use many ways to connect, and to create the sense of beloved community in worship. We sing together (when we can), we share our hopes and fears, we sit together in silence, we move together - we have even been known to dance! We embrace all these different ways of connecting and reconnecting with our inner worlds, our relationships with each other, and with our god. We embrace the Spirit, always reaching inwards as well as outwards. And maybe it's not what's said, or what's believed, or what's done, that matters most – though all that will be a vital outward expression. But it is the shared seeking for paradise, and the discovery that we can find or create a glimpse of it here, together, that matters most. It helps us carry our burdens a little more lightly, it lifts us out of our 'spiritual fog', and it turns our faces gently towards the light once more.

We gather to hold and to be held, to heal and to be healed, to understand and to be understood, to give and to receive. We touch the edges of each other's longing for acceptance and yearning for wholeness, and we see each other's vulnerability and brilliance, as well as our own. And then we extend that offer everywhere we go, and to everyone we meet. And so another world of perception opens up to us, if we let it.

I'd like to close with this short story from the Sufi mystic, Rumi. It's called – surprisingly - Love Dogs... You'll see why.

One night a man was crying, Allah! Allah!

His lips grew sweet with the praising, until a cynic said,

'So I have heard you calling out, but have you ever got any response?'

The man had no answer to that. He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.

He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls, in a thick green foliage.

'Why did you stop praising?' asked Khidr.

'Because I never heard anything back,' said the man.

'But this longing you express IS the return message,' said Khidr.

The grief you cry out from draws you toward union.

Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup.

Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection.

There are love dogs no one knows the names of. Give your life to be one of them.

The world is full of people who yearn for wholeness and seek paradise but don't know where to look. We are surely drawn here to seek and yearn together, because we understand that by doing so, we will find – however fleetingly – a glimpse of paradise in ourselves.

We discover that it's right here, in our own hearts, in our own homes, in this place. At its best, worship reveals us to ourselves and to each other, and sends us back out into the world lighter and truer, more hopeful and inspired, more compassionate and able to make a difference in the world.

Welcome back.

HYMN 188 (G) Let love continue long

Let love continue long,
and show to us the way,
and if that love be strong
no hurt can have a say;
and if that love remain but strong,
no hurt can ever have a say.

If love can not be found,
though common faith prevail,
when love does not abound,
a common faith will fail.
When human love does not abound,
a common faith will always fail.

If we in love unite,
debate can cause no strife:
for with this love in sight
disputes enrich our life.
For with this bond of human love,
disputes can mean a richer life.

May love continue long,
and lead us on our way:
for if that love be strong

no hurt can have a say.
For if that love remain but strong
no hurt can ever have a say.

Music by John Ireland, words traditional American

CLOSING WORDS

May we each go with a spring in our step, a light in our eyes, and a passion in our bellies for this life that desires us just as we desire it. May we have the courage to keep searching, seeing and stretching ourselves towards understanding. May the spirit be with us. And may our love continue long. Amen

Extinguish chalice

CLOSING MUSIC Ring them bells, Bob Dylan