



Sunday 20th June – Blessed to be a blessing

PREPARATION

Welcome

Leader Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you

All **and also with you.**

Leader This is the day that the Lord has made.

All **Let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

Hymn **Dear Lord and Father of Mankind**

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
forgive our foolish ways;
re-clothe us in our rightful mind;
in purer lives Thy service find,
in deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who
heard,
beside the Syrian sea,
the gracious calling of the Lord,
let us, like them, without a word
rise up and follow Thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
where Jesus knelt to share with
Thee
the silence of eternity,
interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
our words and works that drown
the tender whisper of Thy call,
as noiseless let Thy blessing fall
as fell Thy manna down.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
till all our strivings cease;
take from our souls the strain and
stress,
and let our ordered lives confess
the beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our
desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
speak through the earthquake,
wind, and fire,
O still small voice of calm!

Words by John Greenleaf Whittier
Music by Charles Hubert Hastings Parry

Opening activity ~ Scruff and Beaky

Hi Scruff, you're not looking very happy, what's up?

Hi Beaky, it's this letter I got in the post this morning. I'm worried about it.

A letter? It's not a bill for that bumper box of bones is it?

No.

The dentist telling you your check up's due?

No.

Oh, well what does it say that's got you so worried?

I don't know, I haven't read it.

You haven't read it? Why not, it might be nothing to worry about at all!

But it's from my teacher, Mrs McCluskey.

Well what's wrong with that, she's nice isn't she?

Yes, but.....

Scruff, what's going on?

Well.....the thing is, yesterday we were sitting on the carpet for a lesson about walking nicely....

OK.....

And it was so hot and the carpet was itchy and the lesson was a bit boring.....

Oh Scruff, what did you do?

Well.....Jake was sitting in front of me and his ears are so long and fluffy so....I pulled them and Jake yelped, and Mrs McCluskey warned me not to do it again.

And did you do it again?

No....I pulled Sasha's tail instead.

Oh Scruff, that was very naughty. What did Mrs McCluskey do?

She said since I couldn't behave I'd have to leave the lesson and spend playtime picking up litter and think about making good choices.

Oh dear. That's not much fun but it sounds like you deserved it.

I suppose so. I don't want to read this letter because she's just going to be telling me off again.

Well it's no good just ignoring it, better to just read it and get it over with. It might not be as bad as you think.

OK, will you help me if there are any difficult words?

Of course I will.

Dear Scruff,

I know you wanted to enjoy playtime with your friends yesterday instead of picking up litter. But don't be too sad. Sometimes we have to learn from our mistakes and we're all enjoying a cleaner playground. I have so many plans for tomorrow – making cards and toffee-flavoured bones for Father's Day – and I want you to be there with us. So let's work together to make tomorrow a better day.

Lots of love, Mrs McCluskey.

Oh Scruff, what a wonderful letter! You didn't need to be worried after all. You have a lovely teacher, don't you!

Yes Beaky, I really do!

Confession

God our Father,
we come to you in sorrow for
our sins.

For turning away from you,

and ignoring your will for our
lives;

Father, forgive us:

All save us and help us.

For behaving just as we wish,
without thinking of you;
Father, forgive us:
All save us and help us.

For failing you by what we do,
and think and say;
Father, forgive us:
All save us and help us.

For letting ourselves be drawn
away from you
by temptations in the world
about us;
Father, forgive us:
All save us and help us.

For living as if we were
ashamed
to belong to your Son;
Father, forgive us:
All save us and help us.

Absolution

May the Father of all mercies
cleanse us from our sins,
and restore us in his image
to the praise and glory of his name,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

All Amen.

Collect (Prayer of the day)

Leader God our saviour, look on this wounded world
in pity and in power;
hold us fast to your promises of peace
won for us by your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.

All Amen

Everyday Faith ~ Marsha Roberts, St Peter's

Hymn **Giant of Faith**

We all come in different shapes
and sizes
And life is full of many surprises
But one thing stays the same
Jesus is on my side
I don't need to be afraid
I don't need to run and hide
When I open my bible it's clear as
can be

The God that I read about's with
me
And I'm going to be a giant of
faith
Like Moses (Moses)
And Joseph (Joseph)
Daniel, Esther, Rahab and Ruth
No denying the truth
They're giants of faith

Like David (David)
Elijah (Elijah)
Noah and the rest of the team
I'm gonna be a giant of faith
I'm gonna be a giant of faith
Everyday, we always stick
together
Hand in hand, through every
adventure

If I'm playing with my friends
Or when I go to sleep
I know you are always there
And angels are watching me
By faith I can do anything
By faith I can do anything
By faith I can do anything through
Christ

Peter James
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Bible readings

Jeremiah 29:1-14 ~ Pauline Wilde (St Peter's)

This is the text of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and to the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²(This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem.) ³He entrusted the letter to Elasah son of Shaphan and to Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent to King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon. It said:

⁴This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. ⁷Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper." ⁸Yes, this is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: "Do not let the prophets and diviners among you deceive you. Do not listen to the dreams you encourage them to have. ⁹They are prophesying lies to you in my name. I have not sent them," declares the Lord.

¹⁰This is what the Lord says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹²Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the Lord, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

Matthew 5:43-48 ~ Rosemary Titcombe (St Peter's)

⁴³"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Sermon - Rachel

Blessed to be a blessing

Have you ever been in the sort of situation Scruff was in earlier, forced to be somewhere you didn't want to be because of your behaviour? In the headteacher's office perhaps, or even in detention. Or it might have happened through no fault of your own; your parents moved house, or you had to spend time in hospital, or you've been housebound by ill health or lockdown. How does it feel when you're trapped somewhere you don't want to be and you can't see a way to live there or a way to get out of there? How do you respond?

Fiction is full of stories of people trapped or imprisoned in desperate situations. In *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean sentenced to 10 years hard labour for stealing a loaf of bread. In the *Shawshank* redemption, Andy DuFresne is sentenced to life imprisonment after being wrongly convicted of murder. In *A Gentleman in Moscow*, Count Alexander Rostov is sentenced to live out his life under house arrest in the Metropol hotel for publishing subversive poetry. And they respond with various degrees of anger, bitterness and despair. If only they had received a letter like Scruff did, full of unexpected hope and encouragement.

Jeremiah has spent years warning the Israelites to change their ways. And they've spent years ignoring him. Until finally calamity falls – they're conquered by the Babylonians and many are taken away into exile. Away from their homes, away from the temple, away from the place where God dwells with them. They lament, 'how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' And in the middle of their confusion and sorrow and guilt, they receive a letter from Jeremiah. I wonder what they expect it to say? 'I told you so, I warned you what would happen, you brought this on yourselves, you deserve it'. I wonder if they're tempted to throw it away rather than hear Jeremiah tell them off again. But it's a little piece of home and this is what it says:

A message from the Lord, the God of Israel: I know you want to go home but don't listen to false prophets saying you'll be back soon; you're going to be here for 70 years and life won't be easy. But don't despair; there is still life to be found here – you can build and grow and marry and raise children. You can be a blessing to this place and these people.

Because I'm not confined to Israel, I am here with you and you are still my children, my beloved ones. And when you seek me with all your heart you will find me. When the time is right, I will fulfil the plans I have for you – plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future, plans to restore you and bring you home.

What a letter – it's like a warm hug, a dose of grace! It doesn't offer false promises or a quick solution but it offers the steadfast love of the Lord for his children and the encouragement they need to learn to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. The exiles use their time in Babylon to reflect on their history and the mistakes they've made, to deepen their understanding of God, and renew their vision of what it means to be God's people in the world – a light to the gentiles, a blessing to all nations. They write many of the Old Testament books we treasure and develop new ways of worship. But they only have the energy and motivation to do all that because they are grounded in the hope and security expressed in this letter. Perhaps they sing, as we do, 'All my hope on God is founded'.

Among the Babylonian exiles are some familiar characters – Daniel of lions' den fame, and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into the fiery furnace. I wonder if they read this letter, I wonder if it helped them to navigate that tricky path – to be a blessing to Babylon but remain faithful to the Lord. I wonder if they could have imagined how much their stories of faithfulness, born out of such adversity, would bless and inspire countless people over the next 2500 years?

When we first went into lockdown 15 months ago I felt like I'd been thrust into a strange new world. Suddenly, I had too much of my family and not enough of my friends. I was spending 5 hours a day fielding phone calls from distraught parents whose antenatal classes had been moved online, trying to homeschool a scared 9 year old and get to grips with recording sermons, remembering the good old days when I could buy flour any time I wanted, wondering if it counted as stockpiling if I bought toilet rolls a week early just in case there weren't any left next week, thinking how are we meant to celebrate Easter if we can't go to church? I lamented and God answered:

This is nothing new, it's the lament of the exiles. But they learnt to sing a new song and so can you. I was with them and I'm with you. I had plans to prosper them and I have plans to prosper you too.

It was just the message of reassurance and hope I needed to see lockdown in a different way and look forward to what God would do through it. Life didn't suddenly become easy but I was able to look for where God was present. God's reassurance helped me see the joy of worshipping together as a family, the pleasure of discovering beautiful places to walk around Old Woking, the wonder of staying connected on zoom, even with my technophobe mum. Lockdown deepened our sense of community, with the link system and shop&drop. It

motivated us to be more creative and inclusive in our worship. It gave us the space to reimagine our vision and try new things, like Energise, and the Connections Cafe starting up soon. It turns out that God isn't confined to the walls of our church buildings, he's at work in our homes and communities and hospitals in all sorts of ways. In a prison cell or Babylon or lockdown we are so blessed – God is still with us, still promising us a hope and a future.

We can debate how much we as a human race are responsible for this pandemic. We can talk about our misuse of nature or reckless experimentation with viruses, foolhardy decisions by politicians, complacency on the part of the general public, selfishness by first world countries. However much or little we think we're to blame, it's clear that a great many innocent people have suffered and continue to suffer, just as they did at the time of the exile. Perhaps one day the history books will look back at covid-19 and judge it by the blessings that came out of it. Perhaps it will be a wake up call for greater international cooperation, greater respect for nature, greater investment in healthcare for the most vulnerable. Perhaps it will mark the beginning of the revival of the church. Perhaps. If we play our part.

In psalm 122 David writes, 'pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you prosper.' And Jeremiah writes, 'pray for the peace and prosperity of [Babylon]'. It resonates with our gospel reading: 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...[for God] sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'. The message here is clear – God blesses both righteous and unrighteous and we are to do the same, through our actions and in our prayers. In May 2020 Christians from across the UK recorded a song for that very purpose – to bless our nation – *The Lord bless you and keep you, may his favour be upon you and your family for a thousand generations*. You wouldn't think anyone would object to that would you? But it caused some minor controversy in Evangelical circles – was it appropriate to take a blessing spoken over God's people and apply it to pagan nations? Was the church showing the socially acceptable bits of our faith and leaving out the less popular bit – the call for repentance? Was the church, in fact, following in the footsteps of the false prophets who gave the exiles the message they wanted to hear instead of the unpalatable truth? What do you think?

'Pray for the peace and prosperity of Babylon', says Jeremiah. I wonder if Daniel prayed for Babylon during the daily prayer times that got him into so much trouble? I expect so. How often do we pray for peace in Woking, in our troubled inner cities, in our nation and the world? Do we pray for victims and persecutors alike? Do we remember there's a peace beyond an end to warfare and knife crime and playground bullying? True peace comes from God, the author of peace. True prosperity comes from giving up everything we have in exchange for Jesus. To pray for peace is to pray for our friends and our enemies

to come to know Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, as many of us did during Thy Kingdom Come – to pray for them repent, just as our evangelical friends said. So it's good to know that online Alpha courses boomed during lockdown and huge numbers of people watched an online service or turned to prayer, including those who had never been to church before. The challenge we now face is to stay connected to these people as we move back into the offline world, to help those sparks of interest grow into a living faith. What changes are we willing to make so that we have the resources to do that? What are we willing to sacrifice so that we become a blessing to our community?

Do you remember my fictional trio, downcast and embittered at the losses they've endured and the lives they're being forced to live? Jean Valjean receives mercy at the hands of the Bishop of Digne. Andy DuFresne receives the power of hope when he finds a crumbling prison wall. Count Rostov makes a friend who helps him see the hotel with fresh eyes. Mercy, hope and vision that enable them to bless and be blessed in the most unlikely circumstances. As Rostov's friend Mishka observes to him, "Who would have imagined, when you were sentenced to life in the Metropol all those years ago, that you had just become the luckiest man in all of Russia."

I don't know if we'll ever count ourselves lucky to have lived through covid-19 but I do know that if we seek God with all our heart we will find life – in prison, in Babylon, in lockdown and in the future. If we seek God with all our heart then he will bless us with undeserved mercy, steadfast hope and fresh vision just as he did the exiles. And God's blessing will be the foundation for us to be a blessing to the world.

Hymn **May the grace of Jesus Christ**

May the grace of Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Spirit
be with us.

The Lord bless us and keep us,
his face shine upon us,
his grace and his peace rest on us.

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Affirmation of faith (We stand to declare our faith)

Leader We say together in faith
All Holy, holy, holy
 is the Lord God almighty,
 who was, and is, and is to come.

Leader We believe in God the Father,
 who created all things:
All for by his will they were created

and have their being.

Leader We believe in God the Son,
who was slain:

**All for with his blood,
he purchased us for God,
from every tribe and language,
from every people and nation.**

Leader We believe in God the Holy Spirit:
**All the Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'
Even so come, Lord Jesus!
Amen**

Prayers ~ Sue Harvey (St Peter's)

We thank you Lord, for the promise of your presence to the two or three who gather in your name.

Lord, help us to understand that because of your coming to us in the power of the Holy Spirit, prayer is no longer the knocking at a door, but the opening of a window.

Amen

Today we pray that we can be a blessing to others, to our friends and families but also to those we work with and those whom we pass in the street.

Father God, We are surrounded by people daily whom we can bless. Knowing the love of Christ is an amazing feeling. Being a blessing to others can be the perfect opportunity to share God's love.

Knowing what it feels like to be loved should encourage us to share that love with others. Father, your love is the perfect example for us to start learning how to love and bless others.

As Christians, we are called to share God's love with the world. We are a blessing if we choose to bless others. Father, we ask you to work through us so that we can be a blessing for your glory.

Teach us to pray for others and to be an encouragement to them, help us to listen to their needs, to let them know that we are thinking of them and also to give of our time for them.

For Jesus' sake

Amen

We pray for those who are sick or unhappy, including Mary Angus, Eileen and Peter Bliss, Patrick Chapman, Brenda Collard, Gloria Johnson (Eliot Johnson's mother), Lynda Kirk, Barbara Lloyd, Trevor Lloyd, Doreen McKinnon, Denise Randall, Jacquie Still and Joy Storkey for the family and friends of Gary Castle and for anyone who is known to us personally

Father of all mercies, we pray for those in need, and especially those known to us:

- for the sick in body or mind, that through your healing power they may be made whole;

- for the disabled, that they may have faith and courage to overcome their disabilities;
- for the elderly and infirm, and those who care for them, that they may renew their strength as they rest on your love;
- and for the dying, that they may know your peace, now and at the last.

This we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen

Today we pray for all those who assist with our Sunday worship – worship leaders, preachers, intercession leaders and welcomers.

Almighty God, we pray for your blessing on all who share in the life and work of our parish:

in the ministry of word and sacrament,
in teaching and pastoral care,
in service to the community, and those in need,
in fellowship and co-operation.

We pray too for all members of the congregation, that in their varied callings they may advance your kingdom and bear witness to your love, shown in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

On this Father's Day, we celebrate the blessing of fatherhood. Whether by birth or by taking on the responsibility, the fathers and father figures in our lives deserve our admiration and our prayers. Let's join together in thanking God for these men and blessing them. We remember too, those for whom this is a difficult time.

Father God,

We pray today for the health and well-being of our fathers and father figures. Please grant the men that hold such important roles in our lives good health. May their bodies be strong, and may their spiritual hearts grow even stronger each day as they grow closer to You. Please bless them with many years of life, full of beautiful memories.

We know that in this broken world, our relationships with our fathers, grandfathers, or father figures can grow distant or even become estranged due to disagreements. Father, we pray for healing for these relationships if it be your will. Give all those involved discernment, a change of heart or perspective where necessary, and direction in how to foster unity once again. In Jesus' Name, **Amen**

We thank God for giving us other people to be part of our lives:

For parents, and the love which brought us to birth: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

For mothers who have cherished and nurtured us: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

For fathers who have loved and supported us: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

For brothers and sisters with whom we have shared our home:
we praise you, O Lord,

And bring you thanks today.

For children, entrusted to our care as parents: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

For other relatives and friends who have been with us
in our hopes and in our joys: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

For all who first spoke to us of Jesus, and have drawn us into the family of our Father
in heaven: we praise you, O Lord,
And bring you thanks today.

Help us to live as those who belong to one another and to you,
now and always. **Amen**

This week we heard that the longed for relaxations in the Covid precautions have had to be delayed. This is a disappointment for many who had hoped that they would help their businesses and lives to return to a more normal situation. We pray that the virus will continue to recede and vaccination to become universal so that the restrictions can be removed soon.

God of hope, in these times of change,
unite our nation and guide our leaders with your wisdom.
Give us courage to overcome our fears,
and help us to build a future
in which all may prosper and share;
through Jesus Christ our Lord, **Amen.**

Father, as we go forth from this service, strengthen us for service in the world; that
the words we have heard and said
may find expression in our daily life and work,
to the glory of your holy name. **Amen**

Merciful Father
**Accept these prayers for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen**

And finally we join together in the prayer that Jesus himself taught us:

**All Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your Kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

**For the Kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
now and for ever. Amen**

Notices (See Notes & News)

Hymn **All my hope on God is founded**

All my hope on God is founded,
all my trust He shall renew;
He, my guide through changing
order,

only good and only true.

God unknown,

He alone

calls my heart to be His own.

Pride of man and earthly glory,
sword and crown betray His trust;
all that human toil can fashion,
tower and temple, fall to dust.

But God's power,

hour by hour,

is my temple and my tower.

Day by day our mighty giver

The dismissal

The peace of God,
which passes all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds
in the knowledge and love of God,
and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.

All Amen.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All In the name of Christ. Amen.

grants to us His gifts of love;
in His will our souls find pleasure,
leading to our home above.

Love shall stand

at His hand,

joy shall wait for His command.

Still from man to God eternal
sacrifice of praise be done,
high above all praises praising
for the gift of Christ His Son.

Hear Christ's call

one and all:

we who follow shall not fall.

Words after by Joachim Neander
Words by Robert Bridges
Music by Herbert Howells

Worshipping ▶ Loving ▶ Sharing ▶ Growing

