

Written Service Sunday January 7th 2024
A service of worship for use at home
Prepared by Jane Edwards

Charity number 1134226

In the beginning.....

Genesis 1 v 1 - 5

Mark 1 v 4 - 11

Introduction

Welcome to the first written service for 2024. How are you feeling today? As we begin this new calendar year you may be feeling all sorts of emotions. Whether you are excited or jaded, content or despairing, full of life or simply exhausted you are welcome to this act of worship. You are joining together with people at different times and in different locations across Nottingham North East Circuit. Together we are a community with Christ as our Head. Take a moment to acknowledge how you're feeling, and to hold those feelings before God in honesty and openness. Ask God to bless this time of worship for all of us.

I'm Jane Edwards, one of the local preachers who usually worships at Sherwood, and together we'll explore the theme of new beginnings. Christmas is past and in the words of John Lennon 'another year over, and a new one just begun'. Whilst Christmas is a wonderful celebration, it can be tiring, and we can emerge feeling overwhelmed and overstimulated. There's a lot to take in, and plenty of noise and colour. So January is a good opportunity for making things a bit simpler and going back to basics. That's the aim of this service. Let's press the reset button and set the scene for the coming year.

Praise and thanks

We begin with a great hymn; Praise to the Lord the Almighty the King of creation. You can listen to it on the NNE archive here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqJLNzvd_RA&list=PLG-f_VqRqRvo2Oy_8mFyxn4OsBuidFINH&index=17 or simply read, sing or meditate on the words

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of
creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health
and salvation!
Come, all who hear; brothers and sisters
draw near,
Praise him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who will prosper your work
and defend thee;
surely his goodness and mercy shall daily
attend thee.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
if with his love doth befriends thee.

Praise to the Lord who doth nourish thy life
and restore thee,
Fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever
before thee.
Then to thy need he like a mother doth
speed,
Spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.

Praise to the Lord, who when darkness of sin
is abounding,
Who, when the godless do triumph all virtue
confounding,
Shedders his light, chaseth the horrors of
night
Saints with his mercy surrounding.

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me
adore him!
All that has life and breath, come now with
praises before him.
Let the Amen sound from his people again;
gladly for aye we adore him.

*Joachim Neander, translated by Catherine Winksworth and Rupert E
Davies*

Prayer

Living God, in the beginning
you called all life into being.

You created light and darkness, water and land, stars and infinite galaxies.
You created life in all its rich and wonderful diversity to reflect your creativity:
we celebrate your generosity and acknowledge our place in your plan.

Living God, at his baptism you called Jesus to reflect your purpose:
we celebrate his coming among us.

Living God, Today you call us to receive your Holy Spirit, and
to reflect your love in the world:

We thank you for that quiet confidence you give us
And we celebrate your trust in us.
Amen.

Reflecting on God's Word

Before we listen for God's Word in the Bible we ask the Holy Spirit to focus our minds on the meaning of the passage, and to inspire us. You may find it helpful to sing, read or meditate on the words of our next song, Speak O Lord. You can access a version here from the NNE archive

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CLfKCICiQDw&list=PLG-f_VqRqRvo2Oy_8mFyx4OsBuidFINH&index=49

Speak, O Lord, as we come to You
To receive the food of Your holy Word
Take Your truth, plant it deep in us
Shape and fashion us in Your likeness
That the light of Christ might be seen today
In our acts of love and our deeds of faith
Speak, O Lord, and fulfill in us
All Your purposes for Your glory

Teach us, Lord, full obedience
Holy reverence, true humility
Test our thoughts and our attitudes
In the radiance of Your purity
Cause our faith to rise, cause our eyes to see
Your majestic love and authority
Words of pow'r that can never fail
Let their truth prevail over unbelief

Speak, O Lord, and renew our minds
Help us grasp the heights of Your plans for us
Truths unchanged from the dawn of time
That will echo down through eternity
And by grace, we'll stand on Your promises
And by faith, we'll walk as You walk with us
Speak, O Lord, 'til Your church is built
And the earth is filled with Your glory

Keith Getty and Stuart Townend

Old Testament

Let's start at the very beginning (a very good place to start.....)

Read Genesis 1 verses 1 to 5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, Let there be light; and there was light.

And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness.

God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.

And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Spend some time reflecting on these words. Here I've used the NRSVA version, but if you are able try reading the verses in different translations of the Bible, particularly one which is less familiar. Translations can vary quite a bit for this passage, and it may prompt different reflections.

I have to admit that I don't really 'understand' everything in the Genesis passage, but that's ok. It's strange, and beautiful and unfathomable. It's describing something that's impossible to describe, and was written for a pre-scientific age. But whenever I read the words of this passage I'm struck by the simplicity of the language used and magnitude of what it describes. I'm not a creationist (I don't believe the world was literally created in seven days), but I can't fail to be bowled over by the beauty of the poetry and the essential truth that it proclaims. God, the creator brought the universe into being. At one time there wasn't, and then there was. Fiat lux. Let there be light. And those words kick started a chain of events that led to planets, stars, water, mountains, plants, animals, and you and me.

The passage is sometimes described as God bringing order out of chaos. I'm not sure I agree, but it's made me reflect on my own (much more limited!) attempts to bring order and control. If I'm facing uncertainty or I have a job to do I definitely make lists. I have 'to do' lists for everything; a daily list at work, a list for holidays and a list for all those jobs that need doing round the house. There's always more to do, and I never seem to get to the bottom of it. Not only is God far more productive but He has a very different reaction to his achievements. 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.....And God saw that it was good.'

It made me wonder how 'good' we are at seeing 'good' around us. It can be really difficult sometimes, particularly if we're not in a 'good' place ourselves. It can be far easier to pick fault, see the negative, and expect the worse. And when we have a 'to do' list as long as our arm it's easier to plough on with the next item rather than pause and see the good around us.

So I would like to propose an alternative. Instead of a 'to do' list how about trying a 'ta dah' list this January? Take a moment to think of some of the things in your life, big and small, that are 'good'; things that you can point to ('ta dah!') and be grateful for. They could be relationships with friends or family, something outside your window that brings you joy because of its beauty, or something in your home that brings you comfort. I'm going to think about the pleasure of losing myself in a good book and give thanks for the creativity of writers. Once you have your list pause and reflect that they are 'good'. Give thanks to God the source of all goodness.

Hymn - You may find it helpful to sing, read or meditate on the words of our next song, From the highest of heights. You can access a version here from the NNE archive https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6SkYhDXpfs&list=PLG-f_VqRqRvo2Oy_8mFyx4OsBuidFINH&index=25

From the highest of heights to the depths of the sea,
creation's revealing your majesty.
From the colours of fall to the fragrance of spring,
ev'ry creature unique in the song that it sings.
All exclaiming:

Indescribable, uncontainable, you placed the stars in the sky,
and you know them by name: you are amazing, God.
All powerful, untameable; awestruck, we fall to our knees
as we humbly proclaim: you are amazing, God.

Who has told every lightning bolt where it should go,
or seen heavenly storehouses laden with snow?
Who imagined the sun and gives source to its light,
yet conceals it to bring us the coolness of night?
None can fathom.

Indescribable, uncontainable, you placed the stars in the sky,
and you know them by name: you are amazing, God.

All powerful, untameable; awestruck, we fall to our knees
as we humbly proclaim: you are amazing, God.

Indescribable, uncontainable, you placed the stars in the sky,
and you know them by name: you are amazing, God.
Incomparable, unchangeable, you see the depths of my heart
and you love me the same, you are amazing, God.

Laura Story & Jesse Reeves

New Testament

The lectionary for today asks us to reflect on the very first words of the Old Testament, and then the very first words of the oldest book in the New Testament (though not the first one listed in our Bibles!) This year the lectionary uses Mark's gospel as the basis for our reflections. We're going to be studying the book together over the coming months. I love Mark's gospel. It's short, direct, and full of insight. So let's begin at the beginning.....

Read Mark 1 v 1 - 11

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”,

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

I wonder if you saw The Repair Shop on TV over Christmas. It's a quiet un-showy programme that is in its own way revolutionary. Ordinary people bring in items that have a special meaning to them but have become worn or broken. It might be an old record player or a pocket watch or teddy bear. The team then set to work, not with great showmanship, but with infinite care and patience. They pour time, skill, experience and love into the object until slowly it emerges as the object it was meant to be, restored. And then they reunite it with its grateful owner.

It's not too much of a stretch to see the parallels with the two readings today I think. The first reading from Genesis paints a vast canvas celebrating God's creation. The rest of the Old Testament records how things went wrong, and the rocky relationship between God and the people he created. But here, right at the start of Mark's gospel we see a glimpse of something different happening. Here we see Jesus for the first time, emerging out of the water, and once again, just like at the moment of creation, God proclaims that it is 'good'. He is 'well pleased' with his Son and the new work that is just beginning. This Jesus has come for everyone; the rich and the poor, the religious and the ordinary. But he's particularly come for those who need him the most, the lost and battered, the worn and the broken. As we read this gospel together over the next few months we will witness how he pours time, skill, experience and love into those he encounters until they emerge as the people they were meant to be, and reunited their owner. God the creator, Jesus the restorer. It's a message of love and challenge and hope that echoes down the centuries to us. That possibility of restoration is available to all of us, and all those we know. Just reflect on that for a moment, and let it fill your heart. I pray that together we embrace the possibility this year.

Prayers for others, and for ourselves.

Eternal God, it feels as if the whole world has changed and yet in you there is stability and the opportunity of a new beginning. So, we pray now for those whose lives are in turmoil, those whose lives have been turned upside down, those who feel lost. May they feel supported, find fresh hope, and use our prayers in Jesus 'name to strengthen them.

We pray for those for whom Christmas and the New Year has come as a relief, but we pray too for those who feel desperate, alone and worried about their jobs, their finances, their mental health.

May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus 'name to strengthen them.

We pray for those in refugees camps
with little protection from the weather,
those who sleep rough,
those who can't afford to heat their homes.
May they feel supported, find fresh hope:
Lord, use our prayers in Jesus 'name to strengthen them.

We pray for one another, our families,
our communities, our church fellowships.
May we support those who are unwell or grieving.
May we bring fresh hope to those who feel forgotten and are vulnerable,
and may we – both practically and prayerfully – share our faith
in your Son Jesus in whose name we entrust these prayers to you.
Amen.

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Hymn - We finish our worship with a great hymn of praise that brings our thoughts and prayers together -
Great is thy faithfulness. A version can accessed here from the NNE archive
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7XrU9ut0zGY&list=PLG-f_VqRqRvo2Oy_8mFyx4OsBuidFINH&index=40

Great is Thy faithfulness," O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.

"Great is Thy faithfulness!" "Great is Thy faithfulness!"
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
"Great is Thy faithfulness," Lord, unto me!

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love.

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Blessing

Help us to look for you, Lord, around every corner,
in every place and at every time.
Help us to be in tune with new things you are doing,
and help us to join in.

May the Lord bless you this New Year and always
Amen.