



March Team Ministry

March Team St John, St Mary, St Peter, St Wendreda

Welcome

Third Sunday of Epiphany ~ 24th January 2021

Please keep in touch with one another, and I am always glad to hear from you on 01354 279232 or at andrew.marchurch@gmail.com

The rules for Church services have not changed under this lockdown, but with the rise in infections everyone is asked to be especially vigilant. For some people a greater degree of isolating is sensible. No one should feel pressurised in attending church

We have Church services with social distancing, and also, for the foreseeable future, our zooming, emailing and leaflet deliveries. We want people to have a genuine choice. We are also trying to allow other aspects of the church's life to happen. Ideas and suggestions welcome.

St Peter's Sundays 8am & 11am; Wednesdays 10am

St Mary's Sundays 9.15am

St John's Sundays 9.30am; Tuesdays 10am

"Stay in touch, take care, keep safe, continue praying and God bless."

Prayers for this Week

Faithful God, out of power and compassion you sent your Son, Jesus of Nazareth, into our afflicted world to proclaim the day of salvation. Heal the broken-hearted; bind up our wounds; bring us health of body and spirit and raise us to new life in your service. You confirmed his teaching with wondrous deeds, so that we may proclaim him Messiah and Lord. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, praying for the inspiration of your Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Lord of fierce compassion, you name the forces of death in our hearts and institutions and even in the holy places: lift us from the canopy of fear that feeds on repression and pushes away what it cannot abide; go with us to dark and lonely places where we can learn again who we are called to be; through Jesus Christ, the healer of creation. **Amen.**

God of the outstretched hand, in Christ you are moved with anger and pity at a world which labels and rejects its children: release us from the lie that we are born unclean and shape a new community where all may be accepted; through Jesus Christ, the companion of lepers. **Amen.**

Joshua 2 v1-21

Then Joshua son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, 'Go, view the land, especially Jericho.' So they went, and entered the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there. The king of Jericho was told, 'Some Israelites have come here tonight to search out the land.' Then the king of Jericho sent orders to Rahab, 'Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come only to search out the whole land.' But the woman took the two men and hid them. Then she said, 'True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they came from. And when it was time to close the gate at dark, the men went out. Where the men went I do not know. Pursue them quickly, for you can overtake them.' She had, however, brought them up to the roof and hidden them with the stalks of flax that she had laid out on the roof. So the men pursued them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. As soon as the pursuers had gone out, the gate was shut.

Before they went to sleep, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men: 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that dread of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. As soon as we heard it, our hearts failed, and there was no courage left in any of us because of you. The Lord your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly with you, swear to me by the Lord that you in turn will deal kindly with my family. Give me a sign of good faith that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' The men said to her, 'Our life for yours! If you do not tell this business of ours, then we will deal kindly and faithfully with you when the Lord gives us the land.'

Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was on the outer side of the city wall and she resided within the wall itself. She said to them, 'Go towards the hill country, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Hide yourselves there for three days, until the pursuers have returned; then afterwards you may go on your way.' The men said to her, 'We will be released from this oath that you have made us swear to you if we invade the land and you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down, and you do not gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your family. If any of you go out of the doors of your house into the street, they shall be responsible for their own death, and we shall be innocent; but if a hand is laid upon any who are with you in the house, we shall bear the responsibility for their death. But if you tell this business of ours, then we shall be released from this oath that you made us swear to you.' She said, 'According to your words, so be it.' She sent them away and they departed. Then she tied the crimson cord in the window.

Gospel of St Mark 1 v29-45

As soon as they left the synagogue, they entered the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told him about her at once. He came and took her by the hand and lifted her up. Then the fever left her, and she began to serve them.

That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered around the door. And he cured many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.

In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.' He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do.' And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, 'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. After sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them.' But he went out and began to proclaim it freely, and to spread the word, so that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed out in the country; and people came to him from every quarter.

Meditation

I would be surprised if you had not heard of the story of Joshua, Jericho, and the walls that came tumbling down. Probably portrayed as a story of conquest, a military victory, of goodies triumphing over baddies, it seems to make good cinema. The army of Israel, led by Joshua, circling the walls, blowing their trumpets, shouting out, and then the moment when the walls crumble, and the town of Jericho is taken. Jericho became the focus of much early archaeology in the Holy land as people looked for the remains of those walls, and to date and authenticate the conquest of Canaan. But how many of you have heard of the part that Rahab played? Women's voices eclipsed as we had with Tamar last week.

The people of Israel have escaped from Egypt and slavery. They have wandered in the wilderness for a generation and received multiple revelations of God and gained an identity as a people and nation. Now they will get the territory to build that nation. They will cross the Jordan River, into the land promised them by God, a land filled with milk and honey. It is their destiny. It is God's will. It is the future.

Of course the story was recorded in the way we have it many generations later when Israel wanted to celebrate their national story and identity and to affirm their relationship with God. A relationship which also involves land, kingdoms, and nationality. It is a story that still has huge significance for that land that we know as the Holy Land, and is used in the real and current disputes there, and for the outlook of some people throughout the world.

Joshua will be a great general. He sends out his spies for reconnaissance to the first city across the River Jordan. The spies lodge in the prostitute Rahab's house. Maybe that was a place to look inconspicuous, where you would expect travellers to visit. Their cover is blown, the security services search for them. Rahab hides them. They escape, but not before Rahab gets a promise out of them. Rahab, who must know all too well what they are up to, and that they will be back with an army of destruction, gets a promise of rescue.

If you look at Rahab from the perspective of the people of Jericho, it is hard to find anything positive. As well as simply being a loose woman living off immoral earnings, she betrays her city, she tells lies, she deceives, she puts herself above her people. She appears as a selfish, lying traitor.

If we look from the Israelite spies' perspective, she does welcome them (for business?), she does protect them, she does give them a way of escape. Even her ultimate protection in the siege is precarious, and perhaps she will be discovered and punished before getting to safety, whilst her compatriots are put to the sword and city to the sword.

Perhaps her motivation is simply self-preservation. Maybe she has worked out enough about the likely result, and is keen to back a winner. Perhaps she is a perceptive reader of the signs of the times, or her profession as a prostitute has given her inside information. The bible gives us its reason for her reward and preservation; she recognises the God of these spies as the God of earth and heaven and that God has promised this land to the descendants of slaves and wandering migrants.

It is not hard therefore to find reasons why Rahab and her part in our biblical story is not well known. Is she a role model you would choose for faithfulness or a godly life? Do you think her qualities are to be admired and followed? But why is this story included? Again, like last week, the answer can be simply because it happened. Or it can be because in later history there needed to be an explanation of military success, or ethnic cleansing, or how the City of Jericho was a ruin. Or maybe it is to make us a bit uncomfortable about the whole scenario.

As I said earlier, some people find the legitimisation of Israel's conquest of Canaan justifies military and political strategies today. People have found, in the book of Joshua, strength for other wars, invasions, or political strategies. Some may have used this episode to legitimise prostitution or the exploitation of women. But I guess these are different people.

I am deeply uncomfortable when people use the bible to justify war and killing. Yet there are many parts of the bible that seem to do this, including this Jericho story. Why am I uncomfortable? Because I hear Jesus saying "Love your enemies"! Because I hear the commandment "Thou shalt not kill"! Because I believe all people are made in the image and likeness of God. Because I believe Jesus died for the sin of the world, not that he killed for the sin of the world or even for the glory of God.

I am wading into complex areas where people sincerely hold different views. There is, and always has been, worthy debate and discussion and agonising about how to respond to difficult situations. How to respond to violence? How to respond to threat? Can this conflict be justified? Humanity has tried to wrestle, and sometime to limit and control, war and conflict. It has tried to lessen destruction, hurt, damage, and even, may I say, evil. It may well be that often it is more helpful or realistic to talk in terms of taking the lesser evil or the least worst path, rather than simple right or wrong.

I am passionate about seeking peace, but recognising the complexities and ambiguities of all real life situations. If I can recognise that other people, both those who call themselves Christian, and those who do not, can sincerely hold different positions and take different actions, then does not the biblical story of Rahab also invite me to engage with issues of prostitution and sexuality, loyalty and betrayal, identity and self-needs? I need this story to make me uncomfortable, and it is through being uncomfortable that I can, like Rahab, recognise the God of earth and heaven and God's promises. Thank God for Rahab, and her legacy!

God bless, Andrew

Prayers

(From Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Prayers 2020)

Holy Spirit, you create and re-create the Church in all places. Come and whisper in our hearts the prayer which Jesus addressed to his Father on the eve of his passion: "that they may all be one, so that the world may believe".

Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).

Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace, light the fire of your love in us so that suspicions, contempt and misunderstanding cease in the Church. May the walls that separate us fall.

Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).

Holy Spirit, Consoler of all, open our hearts to forgiveness and reconciliation and bring us back from our wanderings.

Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).

Lord Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, give us poverty of spirit so that we may welcome the unexpectedness of your grace.

Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).

Holy Spirit, you never abandon the men, women and children who are persecuted for their fidelity to the gospel. Give them strength and courage, and support those who help them.

Kyrie eleison (Lord have mercy).

God of life, you have created every human being in your image and likeness. We sing your praise for the gift of our many cultures, expressions of faith, traditions and ethnicities. Grant us the courage always to stand against injustice and hatred based on race, class, gender, religion, and fear of those not like ourselves.

God of peace, God of love, in you is our hope!

Merciful God, you have shown us in Christ that we are one in you. Teach us to use this gift in the world so that believers of all faiths in every country may be able to listen to each other and live in peace.

God of peace, God of love, in you is our hope!

O Jesus, you came into the world and shared fully in our humanity. You know the hardships of life for people who suffer in so many different ways. May the Spirit of compassion move us to share our time, life and goods with all those in need.

God of peace, God of love, in you is our hope!

Holy Spirit, you hear the fury of your wounded creation and the cries of those already suffering from climate change. Guide us toward new behaviours. May we learn to live in harmony as part of your creation.

God of peace, God of love, in you is our hope!

Jesus calls us to abide in him, as branches of the true vine. He calls us to bear the fruit of God's healing and reconciling love. He calls us to draw closer to God and to one another as we offer this love to the world.