

The Vine at Home

Fourth Sunday in Lent – Year B (Mothering Sunday)

Call to worship

Speak to us, Lord God, in the midst of our joy and our pain.
Speak to us and inspire us, wherever we are in our journey with you this day.
We come to worship – show us the next step you wish for us to take.

In Jesus' name, Amen.¹

Hymn 239 STF – Sent by the Lord am I

Opening Prayers

Let us worship God at all times and in all places, let praise be on our lips, hands raised in celebration, hearts uplifted in joy.

Gracious, loving God, gather us as your children, comfort and hold us in your warm embrace.

Your Spirit brought the universe into being creating beauty in diversity, order from chaos.

With a mother's heart, your love surrounds us all, in good times and tough moments, in the midst of joy and pain, for you never leave nor abandon us.

You offer strength to the weak, protection to the vulnerable peace to the anxious, blessing to the unloved.

[Hold a moment's silence].

We offer ourselves to you now, yet see times when we have turned away from you.

Needed to be loved afresh, we seek your forgiving touch your precious words and your healing presence.

Help us receive and accept your love knowing that it is freely offered to all.

In the name of Jesus, who loves and cares without question. Amen.²

Let us now say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Ephesians 2:1-10 - From Death to Life

2 You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ^[a]— by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the

¹ Call to Worship written by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Patrick Stonehewer

result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.³

John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, **15** that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[a]

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. **18** Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **19** And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. **20** For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. **21** But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”⁴

Reflections on the readings

I’ve been thinking a lot about the idea of perfection recently. It was sparked by a number of things including the New Year push to better ourselves and strangely enough a perfume advert. The advert has a number of different women all of whom were dressed differently and looked different, they all said “I am perfect”. It seems quite innocuous on the one hand but for me this advert typified one of the two ends of the perfectionism spectrum we find in society:

- At one end there is the message that you are not good enough until you conform to the high standards set by society and find ‘perfection’.
- And at the other end there is the self-belief and self-love argument, you are perfect just as you are, you have no flaws.

Most of us probably find ourselves somewhere in between these two extremes but will all know the two ends and are impacted by them daily.

When I think about these ideas of perfection from a Christian point of view I notice something clearly missing from the two ends of the perfection debate, and that is grace. It is something that outside of our faith we can’t really articulate and in a secular society has been completely lost. It is the idea that though we are not perfect, we are flawed, we make mistakes and we sin, when we acknowledge this, through the grace of God, we are loved and we are saved. God does not think we are perfect and does also not expect us to be perfect. As Christians we should reject the very notion of perfection for ourselves, accepting we are fallen, saved by grace and not our own endeavours.

^{3,4} Bible Text is from New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved

The passages in the lectionary illustrate the grace of God in different situations, but the stipulation is the same, bring your flaws and failings, accept that you are not perfect and then you will be saved and given new life. One of the clearest explanations of grace can be found in the Ephesians reading where Paul outlines very clearly what grace is and what it means for us as followers of Christ.

Most of us will have heard and read John 3:16-21 which begins: 'for God so loved the world'. It beautifully outlines the love God has for us, but it also gives us a bit more of a handbook on how to receive the grace of God and accept our imperfections. Verses 20 and 21 read: 'Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God'.

These two verses outline how we come to accept our imperfection, what God asks of us is to bring our sins, our flaws, our failings and our fears into the light. To bring them to the foot of the cross, and to expose them to God. God asks us to be vulnerable because it is through this vulnerability and acceptance of our imperfect self that we can begin to build the kingdom of God and share the good news. It is in our vulnerability that we receive grace.

Brene Brown, a shame researcher, talks about the three 'gifts of imperfection' in her book of the same title. These are: courage, compassion and connection - once we accept our imperfections we are able to use these gifts, the gifts needed to be good Christians and activists.

Once we accept our imperfections we have the capacity to be courageous. We have the courage to recognise the darkness within ourselves and within the world we inhabit, we can bring that darkness into the light for all to see and demand change. Dr Martin Luther King Jr famously said - "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that, hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that". Just like it says in the gospel of John, it is only when we bring those dark truths and hate into the light do we begin to cast out the darkness in ourselves, and the darkness in our world. Last summer the Black Lives Matter movement brought the great darkness and sin of racial injustice into the light to be named and tackled. We also must name the prejudices inside ourselves and through understanding our flaws, we can try to be better and build a society which represents the Kingdom of God.

Once we accept our imperfection we have the capacity for compassion. When we humble ourselves, lay our flaws and failures out in front of God and our friends and family we see the dignity and worth of each other. We accept that we are made in the image of God, beautiful and worthy, accepted, forgiven and loved by the wonderful and unfathomable grace of God. This enables us to answer the phone to a friend or family member who has had a bad day and not just say 'oh dear how awful' but say 'yes I know how you feel, I've been there'. We can walk alongside people and share their load with compassion and strength, because we are no longer striving for perfection or scared of our weaknesses.

Once we accept our imperfections we have the capacity for connection. We live in a divided world, one where people storm the Capitol building with guns to dispute a democratic election, one where the gap between rich and poor is rising and one where freedom of speech is the defence for disturbing rhetoric. This division arises from the belief in the ego or self, that we are perfect and infallible, that I must be right and you must be wrong, no discussion, which breeds a politics of personality over a politics of policy. We stick to our tribe and ostracise any others. Once we accept our imperfections and know that we are saved through grace and not acts, we can begin to breed connection, we can accept that we

might be wrong, we can listen to one another and find unity. We can begin to see the good in one another and work together, and as Amanda Goran said: “We (can) lift our gaze not to what stands between us, but what stands before us” and begin the kingdom building united.

We must reject the two norms of perfection we find in society, the notion that we are perfect and the notion that we should strive to be perfect. We must bring our imperfections into the light, be vulnerable in front of God and receive his amazing grace. It is only then that we can build a better world filled with courage, compassion and connection.⁵

What are you being called to?

A few words from Fredrick Buechner:

“Vocation is where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

[Pause]

Today, we have a few questions to consider, which might help us to see how our own gladness and desire might align with the needs of the world. Take time to consider these questions.

- What does this quote about vocation mean for you?
- How would you feel to be a stranger, for Christ’s sake, as a witness in God’s mission in the world?
- What does it mean for you to work in partnership across cultures?
- What is it in life that brings you gladness?
- Where do you see need in the world?
- Can these two be brought together in some way? Could this be your calling?

The needs of the world are great, sometimes we stop watching the news because it is too much to bear.

Holy God, we thank you that it is never too much for you to bear. Help each one of us to find one part of the world’s needs where we can focus our attention and bring your light.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Prayers of intercession - *These prayers are based on themes from Colossians 3.*

Let us pray as God’s chosen people, called to love. Mother of all, be with those who need you and assure them of your love.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

We pray for places where families are separated due to conflict, disaster or persecution.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

Where there is hurt, we pray for your forgiveness through your unconditional love, one which sits by quietly and cares without question.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

⁵ Reflection written by Rachel Allison

We seek your gentle touch on those who have had difficult experiences with a parent, and in places where there is anger, bitterness and rebuke.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

We hold before you those struggling to bring up their children alone, as they juggle conflicting demands, needing patience and resilience.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

Reach out in compassion towards those who have lost a child, whatever the circumstances, or because they are unable to have much-wanted children.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

Be present with us all, separated and isolated because of the pandemic, yearning to hold a hand, offer a kiss, give a hug or simply be with someone we love.

Mother God, hear our prayer.

In word and in deed,
we pray in the name of Jesus,
who binds us together in perfect unity. Amen.⁶

Hymn 421 STF – Empty broken, here I stand

Blessing

Go out into this world, and be a people who are a beacon of hope in the wilderness.

Go out into this grieving world, groaning with the labour-pains of new life, and share stories of resurrection.

Go out and build connection, even amongst the challenges of self-isolation, travel restrictions and physical distancing.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.⁷

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Patrick Stonehewer

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker