**COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE SERVICE**

**Presenter: Revd Dr Calvin T Samuel**

**Parade Service**

**Sunday 14th June 2020**

**~ What makes people join the church? ~**

**WELCOME & INTRODCUTION**

Good Morning. My name is Calvin Samuel and I’m Methodist minister for the towns of Rochford and Rayleigh in the County of Essex.

Welcome to this covenant community online service. We are internationally dispersed, but we covenant today to come together in worship

What makes people join the Church? Over the next few weeks we’ll be journeying with the early church into the Book of Acts in the days, weeks and months that followed the first Pentecost as the Church grew from a small number of people praying in a room to several thousand and eventually 2.3 billion people worldwide today. But first we sing.

**HYMN : Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart** (StF 545)

Be Thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,

Naught be all else to me, save that thou art -  
Thou my best thought, by day or by night;  
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;  
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord.  
Thou my great Father; thine own may I be,  
Thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor vain, empty praise;  
Thou mine inheritance, now and always;  
Thou and thou only first in my heart,  
High King of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, my victory won,  
May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!  
Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,  
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all. *Eleanor Hull*

**Hymn : All who are thirsty**

All who are thirsty

All who are weak  
Come to the fountain  
Dip your heart in the stream of life  
Let the pain and the sorrow  
Be washed away  
In the waves of His mercy  
As deep cries out to deep (we sing)

Come Lord Jesus come (x4)

Holy Spirit Come *Brenton Brown & Glenn Robertson*

**PRAYERS**

I’m delighted that some members of our uniformed organisations, Cubs and Brownies, Guides and Scouts will be helping to lead this service. They will lead us now in prayer. I invite you to respond using the words in yellow which appear on your screen, or the text in bold type if you’re listening on audio and working from a hard copy.

Let us pray.

Your glory, O God, fills heaven and earth

and all creation resounds with your praise.

As we rejoice in your presence,

may we know your power to save

and praise you for your faithfulness,

now and forever;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**Prayers of Confession**

Let us make our confession to God.

If we have fallen into despair

**Lord forgive us**.

If we have failed to hope in you,

**Lord forgive us**.

If we have been fearful of death,

**Lord forgive us**.

If we have forgotten the victory of Christ,

**Lord forgive us**.

*Silence*

May the living God

raise us from despair,

give us victory over sin

and set us free in Christ. **Amen.**

**SCRIPTURE**

Our scripture lessons today are from Genesis 18 and Acts 2. The first relates the promise of birth of the chosen people. the other speaks of the birth of the Church.

**Genesis 18.1–15**

*The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, “My lord, if I find favour with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.”*

*So they said, “Do as you have said.” And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.” Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

*They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”*

*The Lord said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. He said, “Oh yes, you did laugh.”*

**Acts 2.37–47**

*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.”*

*And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**The Sermon**

The Early Church that we encounter on the pages of the Book of Acts is the Church at its most creative. It’s an organism that grew very quickly; on the day of Pentecost 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus and joined the new Church. And in the days and weeks that followed more and more people joined the fledgling Church.

It very quickly had to figure out how to live with immense diversity, because those who became Christians had come from all over the world into Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, heard the wonders of God declared in their native languages and then went back home with their new found faith to figure out how to live there as people of the Messiah. They were Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia and Egypt, Libyans Romans, Cretans and Arabs.

People continued to join the Church in the months and years that followed. They came to faith in Jesus Christ and became part of this new community.

But what made them join the Church? Perhaps at that time the Church was seen as fresh, cool and trendy, the new kid on the block. Now that we’ve been around for nearly 2,000 years, we’re less fresh, less cool and less trendy. Maybe. But the question still has to be asked. What made people join the Church? What attracted them to faith in Jesus?

This is more than an academic or an intellectual question. Clearly, it’s a relevant question for the Church today, because we are still called to share something of our faith in Jesus at a time when very few people, in this country, join the Church. The situation is different in other parts of the world. Outside of Western Europe lots of people come to faith and join the church every day. Within Western Europe we are in a different situation. Perhaps because European culture has been so profoundly shaped by Christian faith, it has become background noise, it’s in the culture but not in our consciousness.

The situation varies from denomination to denomination. Some parts of the Church are growing pretty well and attracting new people to faith. Other parts struggle much more. So, what makes people join the Church? As we look at the story of that first Pentecost 4 things stand out for me.

First, we must acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit. 3,000 people joined the Church on that first day of Pentecost because there was a profound and dynamic move of the Spirit. People encountered something of God in a way they had not before. This something beyond anyone’s control or influence. People come to faith when they encounter something of God that genuinely, and in many cases permanently moves them

Second, people join the Church because they encounter something of God in people of God that they encounter. It’s striking that it was as people experienced something of the power of God at work in the early Church that they came to faith in Jesus, and joined the Church.

Whilst it’s true that the work of the Spirit is entirely outside our control, we can, nonetheless, choose whether we seek actively seek to cooperate with the work that God wishes to do by his Holy Spirit.

The question we need to wrestle with is how far do people truly encounter something of God in us or among us in our gatherings for worship?

It’s not enough for us to be religious and well meaning. It’s not enough for us to believe in God, or to value scripture. It’s not enough for us to be good people or people of integrity. The task of discipleship is to reflect something of the One who has called us to follow him, even though we do so imperfectly. The early followers of Jesus were so full of the Holy Spirit that those who encountered them encountered something of God. My prayer is that it will be so for us. To encounter us is to encounter something of the God within us.

Third, people join the Church in when they are invited to do so. Meeting people who are full of the Holy Spirit is significant but that may not lead anyone to joining the Church or coming to faith. Peter shared something of the gospel and those who heard him asked what shall we do? Peter invited them to repent and be baptized. It was in response to Peter’s preaching and invitation that 3,000 people came to faith in Jesus and joined the Church on that first day of Pentecost.

Never underestimate the power of an invitation. We so often assume that people are unwilling to receive our invitation to explore faith. This is not true. Lots of people are on the outside of Church because those of us who might have been able to invite them have failed to do so. When was the last time you invited someone to Church?

We will not see people coming to faith or joining the Church if we are not willing to invite our friends, our neighbours, our family members, our work colleagues to consider this faith of ours in Jesus Christ.

At this point in our life together where Church is online, where the people you might like to invite won’t even need to leave their own homes to explore what Church is about, we will never have a better opportunity to invite than right now. Who might you like to invite?

Fourth, people join the Church when they experience the Church responding to injustice and inequality. The Church in Acts was truly extraordinary. They were so concerned about the poor among them that they decided to sell their possessions and goods and to have all things in common so that anyone who was in need could have enough.

That’s extraordinary isn’t it? Imagine selling your car, clothes, furniture, your stuff, perhaps even your house, so that the needs of the poor in your community could be met. That’s a bit more hard core than giving some of our food to the local foodbank.

One of the reasons people joined the Church is because it seemed worthwhile to joining. Here are people working to make a real difference in their communities.

In the last few weeks we’ve seen international protests in response to issues of racial justice. The killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and others in the United States in recent months have touched a nerve and exposed systemic racism to the world. Black lives matter. That’s not a controversial statement. To quote Professor Gary Younge: Because our lives literally depend on it, we are forced to make the obvious explicit, in the hope that some will cease to regard the obscene as inevitable.

We the Church can’t be on the sidelines in the face of issues such as these, even if they make us deeply uncomfortable. A church that is engaged with issues of justice, seeking in make a difference in and to the world, is a Church worth joining.

Gracious God, we pray for your Church. Fill us with your Pentecost Spirit, set our hearts and lives on fire with your love and send us out in your Power to change the world. Amen.

If you’re part of this service today and you haven’t yet genuinely come to faith in Jesus Christ I invite you to make the words of the next hymn a prayer to God. Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew.

**Hymn : Breathe on me Breath of God** (StF 370)

Breathe on me Breath of God,

Fill me with life anew,  
That I may love what Thou dost love,  
And do what Thou wouldst do.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
Until my heart is pure,  
Until with Thee I will one will,  
To do and to endure.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
Till I am wholly Thine,  
Until this earthly part of me  
Glows with Thy fire divine.

Breathe on me, Breath of God,  
So shall I never die,  
But live with Thee the perfect life  
Of Thine eternity. *Edwin Hatch*

**Prayers of Intercession**

In the power of the resurrection we offer our prayers to God.

Let us pray.

Remember, O Lord, in your love

the Church throughout the world

those recently baptised and confirmed,

and those whose baptism or confirmation

has been postponed because of the pandemic

and those who minister to others

May your whole Church know your power

and be a sign that Christ is risen.

Lord, of life

**hear us in your love.**

Remember in your love the world you have made

those who seek a fair and proper use

of the world’s resources

and all who strive for justice

and peace among the nations.

May the whole earth be transformed

by mercy and rejoice in hope

Lord, of life

**hear us in your love.**

Remember in your love those who suffer

the victims of violence and injustice

those who mourn today.

May all in need find comfort, strength

and freedom in the living Christ.

Give us wisdom and courage to challenge

systemic injustice wherever we encounter it

and work towards a better future

Lord, of life

**hear us in your love.**

Remember in your love those who have died…

those who have confessed the faith

and those whose faith is known to you alone.

May all your children receive grace and light

according to their needs and come at last

to share with all the saints in life eternal.

Lord, of life

**hear us in your love.**

God of salvation,  
who sent your Son to seek out and save what is lost,  
hear our prayers  
on behalf of those who are lost in our day,  
receiving these petitions and thanksgivings  
with your unending compassion. **Amen.**

*In silence bring more personal intercessions to God….*

We draw all our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus gave us in its modern form. The words will appear on screen:

**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.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,**

**now and forever. Amen.**

The world in which we live is a complicated one. Covid-19 has changed our lives, possibly permanently. It has exposed some of our values and injustice that might otherwise remain hidden. And it’s a complicated space in which to be a Christian and to try to make sense of faith. And that’s before we factor in the everyday challenges of family life, of birth and death, marriages and divorce, careers or unemployment. But when we work through it all one thing remains. God’s love is ever present. It never gives up on me.

**Hymn : Higher than the mountains that I face**

Higher than the mountains that I face

Stronger than the power of the grave  
Constant through the trial and the change  
One thing remains  
This one thing remains

*Your love never fails it never gives up  
It never runs out on me  
Your love never fails it never gives up  
It never runs out on me  
Your love never fails it never gives up  
It never runs out on me*

*Your love.*

On and on and on and on it goes  
For it overwhelms and satisfies my soul  
And I never, ever, have to be afraid  
One thing remains  
This one thing remains

*Your love never fails it never gives up…*

In death, and in life  
I'm confident and covered by the power of your great love  
My debt is paid, there's nothing that can separate  
My heart from Your great love

*Your love never fails it never gives up…*

On and on and on and on it goes…

*Brian Johnson, Christa Black & Jeremy Riddle*

**THE BLESSING**

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few."  
I send you forth in the name of Jesus Christ:  
Proclaim the good news,  
cure the sick,  
raise the dead,  
embrace the outcast.  
Freely you have received; freely give.

And the blessing of God,

the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit

abide with you this day and always. **Amen.**

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