



14th February 2021 Sunday before Lent

The Gathering

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Greeting

We meet in the presence of God
**who knows our needs,
hears our cries,
feels our pain,
and heals our wounds.**

Song: Beauty for brokenness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D81ZD1NDPyE>

Prayers of Penitence

We confess our sin, and the sins of our society,
in the misuse of God's creation.
God our Father, we are sorry
for the times when we have used your gifts carelessly,
and acted ungratefully.
Hear our prayer, and in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We enjoy the fruits of the harvest,
but sometimes forget that you have given them to us.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We belong to a people who are full and satisfied,
but ignore the cry of the hungry.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We are thoughtless,
and do not care enough for the world you have made.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

We store up goods for ourselves alone,
as if there were no God and no heaven.
Father, in your mercy:
forgive us and help us.

The Lord enrich us with his grace,
and nourish us with his blessing;
the Lord defend us in trouble and keep us from all evil;
the Lord accept our prayers,
and absolve us from our offences,
for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
Amen.

Collect

Holy God,
you know the disorder of our sinful lives:
set straight our crooked hearts,
and bend our wills to love your goodness
and your glory
in Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Liturgy of the Word

2 Kings 2:1-12

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. ² Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel." But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

³ The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

⁴ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho."

And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho.

⁵ The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

⁶ Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

⁷ Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. ⁸ Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

⁹ When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

¹⁰ "You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

¹¹ As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. ¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 50:1-6

¹ The Mighty One, God, the LORD,
speaks and summons the earth
from the rising of the sun to where it sets.
² From Zion, perfect in beauty,
God shines forth.
³ Our God comes
and will not be silent;
a fire devours before him,
and around him a tempest rages.
⁴ He summons the heavens above,
and the earth, that he may judge his people:
⁵ “Gather to me this consecrated people,
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice.”
⁶ And the heavens proclaim his righteousness,
for he is a God of justice.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Song: Christ be our light

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Y5N6oxIKH0>

Gospel Reading

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to Mark. Glory to you, O Lord.

Mark 9:2-9

² After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. ³ His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. ⁴ And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

⁵ Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” ⁶ (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.)

⁷ Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

⁸ Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

⁹ As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

This is the Gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ.

Sermon

Many, many years ago I had a brief conversation with a police officer who served in the Hertfordshire Constabulary on the subject of criminality associated with the use of drugs. He recounted a conversation he had had with a colleague in Surrey, who told him they did not keep a record of crime associated with drugs use, did not have a drugs squad, did not target the use of drugs and, consequently, did not make many arrests associated with drug use. The upshot was that Surrey did not have a drug problem because their recorded crime and arrest figures were low. Brilliant, let's ignore something, let's not count it, and it will go away.....

This came to mind a few years back when one of my sons, working at McDonalds, left his phone in his staff locker. They were not allowed to take their phones into the kitchen or front of house area and, perversely, there were no locks on the lockers. At the end of the shift the phone was gone. He reported the theft to West Midlands Police who asked whether the theft was witnessed. The answer was no; the cctv system did not cover the lockers and no one saw the phone being taken. 'We'll record it as being lost then,' he was told, 'that's our policy unless a phone theft is witnessed. You must have lost it'. My son replied he hadn't lost it, it had been stolen and he needed a crime number for his insurance claim. He did ask, with some prompting from his dad, whether it was their policy to assume all stolen cars had just been absentmindedly mislaid unless someone witnessed the theft and was told he was just being silly! He eventually got it logged as stolen and got a crime number and I have had a deep suspicion of all figures released by the West Midlands Police ever since. Let's ignore something, let's not count it, and it will go away.....

To be fair, it's not just the police. I saw the same thing years ago when I worked in the health service. We've seen it with the presentation of data surrounding the pandemic. I have encountered it with local authorities and their attempts to massage homelessness figures, to the consternation, amusement and anger of the service providers and outreach teams involved. I suspect it happens everywhere; there are lies, damned lies and statistics..... And then there are performance targets!

Today the gospel reading focuses on the event we know as the transfiguration, and I was all set to preach a sermon on that. Then I looked at my wall planner, which the Church Times kindly gives me each year, and another note is made on it. No, not Valentine's Day, which I am sure is the first thing that springs to mind on the 14th February.

The church has a habit of encouraging people to think about specific issues on some Sundays and today is one such Sunday.

Today is Racial Justice Sunday.

Many of my colleagues will approach something like Trinity Sunday in fear and trepidation. How can we say something about the Trinity and not get labelled a heretic at the same time? Much angst is expended trying to get it right. Surprisingly, one's attempts not to trash the doctrine of the Trinity rarely get much negative feedback.

But say something about race and my days, there is always someone..... And usually one gets told to 'learn something about your history'. It is a subject which immediately polarises people. People feel threatened, accused, guilty perhaps, uncomfortable.....

Churches Together in Britain and Ireland defined racism thus:

A comprehensive definition of racism is that it is a system of attitudes, actions and structures at personal, communal and institutional levels which always involves ethnicity and which arises as a distorted expression of positive human needs especially for belonging, identity and free expression of difference.

Racism is expressed in

- destructive patterns of relating:
- hardening the boundaries between groups
- overlooking others
- belittling, dehumanising or demonising others
- justifying or collaborating in the domination of others
- physically or verbally intimidating or attacking others.

Racism is about power and privilege. Racism and racial identity and the injustices that go with them are not primarily about the colour of a person's skin. The Irish and Eastern European communities can talk eloquently about the impact of racism. However, I think it is probably true to say that the primary driver is the colour of one's skin.

The call for racial justice is the call for justice. Racial justice involves the fair treatment of people. We use the adjective 'racial' to highlight the source of that injustice, but our central focus is justice.

Justice often takes time. Those who are oppressed and treated unfairly usually have to suffer the wait for justice, which can take years, decades, centuries. The root of Granville Sharp's campaigning against the slave trade lay in an encounter with a slave in 1765. William Wilberforce began to use his voice against the slave trade in 1785. In 1807, the motion to abolish the Atlantic slave trade was passed. The Slavery Abolition Act was passed in 1833.

Slavery continues today.

Racial Justice Sunday has happened every year from 1995; racial injustices continue each year.

People mistreat each other, take advantage of weakness, abuse the power they have, discriminate, debase, dehumanise and degrade. And that's what happens in the Church!

The book by my friend and former tutor Mukti Barton, 'Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection' carries the testimonies of those excluded from the church in this country on the grounds of racism. It is not a proud history but ignoring it does not make it go away.

Within the UK there is copious evidence for the poorer outcomes in terms of socio-economic indicators based purely on peoples' race. Critiques of the health system, justice system, educational system and so forth are legion. Combining this with direct evidence and personal experience, we clearly have a problem.

And I suppose the problem of engaging with racial justice purely on a statistical level is that it ceases to be personal. It becomes transformative when we know the people involved and it becomes a relational issue. Every single person from the black and minority ethnic community with whom I have had a discussion about racism have experienced the problem on a regular basis. Not once or twice, but frequently, sometimes as a daily occurrence. Either these people are delusional, or liars, or we have a problem. I am inclined to believe the latter.

Ignoring the problem, not taking notice of the numbers (which since 2016 have been assiduously counted) will not make the problem go away.

The fourth of the five marks of mission, which I have mentioned before, states that the church will seek to transform unjust structures of society, *to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation*. (Italics added in 2012). This is an active commitment, demanding action from us all.

We are all children of God, of value and loved. A lack of justice led the prophets of the Hebrew Bible to cry out. A lack of justice is repugnant to the Kingdom of God. I said earlier that justice took time, but it is abhorrent that with less than just over 10 years to go before we remember the 200th anniversary of the passing of the Abolition of Slavery Act we still live in a society and a world where slavery remains a fact of life for many and the structures built upon that evil legacy continue.

Our Gospel reading for this Racial Justice Sunday is Mark's account of the Transfiguration. One reading of Peter's desire to create tents is that he wanted to preserve that moment, to stay in that moment. Like Peter, most of us would like to stay on the mountaintop in that moment of revelation and transformation, but we know that there is work to be done in the valley, where we meet life in all its beauty and messiness, joy and pain.

So today, on this special Sunday, let us recommit ourselves to the journey, the striving, the determination to simply do God's will. Let us live as if we are still on the mountaintop, gazing at Jesus transfigured before us, but be willing to take that transforming light and shine it into the lives and places where racial injustice remains. We are not called to build tents and contain what we have been given; the light of Christ is not for keeping to ourselves, it is to be shared with others; it can bring light to those issues which divide our communities, our nation and our world today. We are called to be agents of transformation here in the valley where we live and seek to do God's will.

And to those who will look at me and say where do we start? We start by counting the numbers, hearing the stories, and acknowledging the problem.

Shalom,

Ian

Affirmation of Faith

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.
Amen.**

Prayers of Intercession

We pray for the coming of God's kingdom.
Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

You sent your Son to bring good news to the poor,
sight to the blind,
freedom to captives

and salvation to your people:
anoint us with your Spirit;
rouse us to work in his name.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to bring help to the poor
and freedom to the oppressed.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to tell the world
the good news of your healing love.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to those who mourn,
to bring joy and gladness instead of grief.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

Send us to proclaim that the time is here
for you to save your people.

Father, by your Spirit
bring in your kingdom.

God of mercy,
**you know us and love us
and hear our prayer:
keep us in the eternal fellowship of
Jesus Christ our Saviour.
Amen.**

The Peace

Christ is our peace.
If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.
The old has passed away: behold, everything has become new.

May the peace of the Lord be always with us and all those we love.

Song: Way Maker

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29lxnsqOkmQ>

An act of Spiritual Communion

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.

Thanks be to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for all the benefits you have given me,
for all the pains and insults you have borne for me.
Since I cannot now receive you sacramentally,
I ask you to come spiritually into my heart.
O most merciful redeemer, friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly,
and follow you more nearly, day by day.
Amen.

Lord, in these days of mercy,
make us quiet and prayerful;
in these days of challenge,
make us stronger in you;
in these days of emptiness,
take possession of us;
in these days of waiting,
open our hearts to the mystery of your cross.

Song: Yet not I but through Christ in me
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwc2d1Xt8gM>

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water
welling up to eternal life,
perfect in you the image of his glory;
and the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.

The Dismissal

To God the Father, who loved us,
and made us accepted in the Beloved:
to God the Son, who loved us,
and loosed us from our sins by his own blood:
to God the Holy Spirit,
who spreads the love of God abroad in our hearts:
to the one true God be all love and all glory
for time and for eternity.
Amen.