

Traditional Home service Sunday 13th March

OPENING PRAYER

Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Lord Jesus Christ, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen

PRAYER OF PENITENCE

Let us admit to God the sin which always confronts us.

Father, we have sinned against heaven and against you. We are not worthy to be called your children. We turn to you again. Have mercy on us, bring us back to yourself as those who once were dead but now have life through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

PRAISE

Let everything be said and done in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God through Jesus Christ. Sing psalms, hymns and sacred songs:

Let us sing to God with thankful hearts.
Open our lips, Lord:
and we shall praise your name.

HYMN 1 (Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty)

**READINGS - Genesis 15.1-12,17-18
Philippians 3.17 - 4.1
Luke 13.31-35**

TALK

CREED

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

Spend some time praying for our nation, our community and our families.

THE LORD'S PRAYER

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.

HYMN 2 (Stand up, stand up for Jesus)

CONCLUSION

God, who from the death of sin raised you to new life in Christ, keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always.
Amen.

HYMNS TO USE

1 Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
Early in the morning our song shall rise to
thee.
Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

2 Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore
thee,
casting down their golden crowns
around the glassy sea;
cherubim and seraphim falling down
before thee,
which wert and art and evermore shalt
be.

3 Holy, holy, holy! Though the darkness
hide thee,
though the eye of sinful man thy glory
may not see,
only thou art holy; there is none beside
thee,
perfect in pow'r, in love, and purity.

4 Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All thy works shall praise thy name in
earth, and sky and sea.
Holy, holy, holy! merciful and mighty!
God in three persons, blessed Trinity!

1 Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
Ye soldiers of the cross;
Lift high his royal banner,
It must not suffer loss.
From victory unto victory
His army shall he lead,
Till every foe is vanquished,
And Christ is Lord indeed.

2 Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
Stand in his strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you,
Ye dare not trust your own.
Put on the gospel armor,
Each piece put on with prayer;
Where duty calls or danger,
Be never wanting there.

3 Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle,
The next the victor's song.
To those who vanquish evil
A crown of life shall be;
They with the King of Glory
Shall reign eternally.

Sermon - Barbara MacMillan
Jesus: The Tree of Life
Philippians 3:17-4:1 7 Luke 13:31-35

Many of you know that I am an EFL teacher; I teach English to international students, usually young adults who want to go to university in English-speaking countries. This was my first job, my most recent job, and I would love to return to it someday. I absolutely love it. I think what I love so much about it is that I get to meet people from all over the world and learn about their cultures—their unique way of perceiving and understanding the world around them—and I grow personally in the process. I find it incredibly refreshing to realize that my point of view is not universal; that other people can look at the same information I see yet reach a very different conclusion.

Not too long ago, I had a funny experience during a lesson. A student from China suddenly went rigid with fear and let out a little gasp. When I looked to see what had happened, I saw that a ladybird had landed on her desk. Something innocent enough. Yet for her, this cute little insect that children in this country try to catch so they can allow them to climb on their fingers, was totally repulsive. Another student had to come and remove it so that the lesson could carry on. It was such a disruption that I decided to check that my students were aware that in the UK it was called a “ladybird” rather than a “ladybug” because a lot of students overseas use American English textbooks, and then, just out of curiosity, I asked my students what a ladybird was called in their native languages. And do you know? In Russian, a ladybird is called “God’s little cow”. I think that conjures us such a sweet image, that high up in heaven, from God’s point of view a cow would appear as tiny as a little bug.

A sweet little ladybird can be called something very different in another language. A sweet little ladybird can be considered repulsive in another country. How we understand a small, spotted insect isn’t right or wrong, good or bad—because, really, how is a ladybird in any way like a lady or a bird—but it is different from how other people view it.

And as I dwelled on these two passages that were read to us this morning, I got the sense

that Paul and Jesus were touching on a similar idea—addressing a difference of cultures—and that they were inviting us to examine, to question, to re-consider the constructs or belief systems that we have allowed to define our faith. Moreover, they are warning us to make sure that we have not grown comfortable with traditions and habits, things that seem harmless to us in our earthly minds, but are, in fact, offensive to heaven.

Although these two passages address a problem, we see the solution: the gospel is always good news!

First, let’s look at the passage in Philippians. It may not seem obvious from these few verses, but Philippians is called the “Joyous Gospel of Christ” by some scholars. Paul’s main theme in this letter is the gospel, and the word gospel appears more in this letter than in any of his others. It also contains the words “joy” and “rejoicing” eighteen times, which is striking because we learn in Chapter 1, that Paul is writing from prison. From verse 17, Paul shifts his focus away from joy, momentarily, and he begins to warn the church in Philippi to take note of who they are following. Are they following leaders who are guiding them to live out the true gospel of Christ, the gospel they received? Or are they being led astray by people (religious hypocrites, 3:1) who have compromised the gospel by telling believers that they also need to observe aspects of the Jewish law, specifically being circumcised. Paul writes:

¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

These are very strong words. This word “enemy” is *echthros* in Greek, and it’s the same word Paul uses in Romans 5:10,

¹⁰ For if, while we were God’s **enemies**, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

...and it’s the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 5:43-44,

⁴³ ‘You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbour^[a] and hate your **enemy**.” ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

... and it’s the same word the writer of Hebrews uses in 1:13, quoting Psalm 110:1.

The Lord says to my Lord

‘Sit at my right hand
until I make your **enemies**
a footstool for your feet^[a]?’

This word “enemy” clearly refers to someone who is hostile to God and His people; however, Paul is using it to describe a group within the “religious” community in Philippi. And it makes me wonder, can people who think they are following God actually be His enemies?

I’ll return to that question later.

Moving on to verse 19, Paul writes—“Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.” First, we need to be aware that the phrase “their god is their stomach” is an idiom that doesn’t make much sense to modern English readers. If we look at it more closely, we can get a sense of what he’s saying. The word “stomach” in this verse is *koilia* in Greek. It is translated as stomach or belly most often. For example,

Matthew 12:40

⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the **belly** of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

However, it can also be translated as “womb” (Luke 1:44)

⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my **womb** leaped for joy.

It can even refer to our “innermost being” (John 7:38).

³⁸ Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow **from within them**.^[a]

Clearly, when Paul mentions the word stomach, he isn’t talking about food or

appetites (which is something that our western minds can easily relate to), but rather a concept that we might translate as “the gut”, like in the expressions, “go with your gut” or “trust your gut”. [Their God is the Belly | Mitchell Lewis \(wordpress.com\)](http://www.belly1mitchelllewis.wordpress.com) And these phrases, we know, refer to something deep within us, not our digestive system, something we could describe as our intuition or instinct.

If we come to verse 19 from that angle, we see that Paul is criticising people whose God is their own instinct. He is criticising people who are worshipping their own intuition, people who are trusting their gut, and allowing their own understanding to guide not their day-to-day life, but rather their relationship with God. And from their “gut” they are persuading others to relate to God incorrectly as well. They are interpreting heavenly things from an earthly mindset, and in the process, they are leading other people astray. In the Passion Translation, it says their minds are in the dirt, which seems to capture just how far from heaven their thinking is! Paul warns the Philippian church to get out of the dirt, to have the courage not to be like these leaders. Instead, he reminds them

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven.

I think Paul is highlighting a culture clash that still affects us today: even within church or religious communities, there is a battle between conflicting mindsets and differing ways of interpreting things. In the years that I’ve been a Christian, I’ve attended churches where I’ve been told that people who can’t speak in tongues don’t have full access to the power of the Holy Spirit, I’ve been told that people who do speak in tongues are most likely under the influence of a demon because the spiritual gifts died out in the early church, and I’ve also attended churches where women who wear trousers and don’t wear hats in corporate worship are perceived as living in rebellion to God’s word. And within all of these churches, women weren’t allowed to preach (but let’s not go there!). These are minor issues, in my opinion, much like saying ladybird as opposed to ladybug. What Paul is talking about is something far weightier. He’s addressing the moral compass from which

we navigate our spiritual life. Is it aligned with heaven? Or is it aligned with earth?

A few speakers that I like to listen to describe this tension using a different picture: they go back to the very beginning and describe it in terms of the two trees in the garden of Eden. The question we are to ask ourselves is this: Are we eating fruit from of the Tree of Life, or are we eating fruit the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

We know from reading Genesis 2 and 3 that God created a beautiful garden, called Eden, for humanity to enjoy, and from Eden, humanity was to fill the whole Earth with God's goodness. He planted beautiful trees throughout the garden, trees that were both "pleasing to the eye and good for food". In the centre were two special trees: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God commanded man to eat from any tree in the garden—any tree, so that included the tree of life; God commanded him to eat from the tree of life—and warned him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because it would lead to death—the opposite of God's creative nature. Unfortunately, we know that God's adversary came to deceive Adam and Eve—he invited them to doubt the goodness of God, he invited them to trust their own understanding, to follow their intuition, to trust their gut...

Genesis 3:16

⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.

It seemed like an okay thing to do. What harm would come of it?

And we all know the answer. Death. Death came of it. Not only death to our bodies and death to creation, but death to our relationship with God and with one another. Eating from the tree of good and evil represents taking the authority to define good and evil on our terms, to follow the God of our stomachs—to put our trust in our own understanding—rather than trusting the one true God.

Ultimately, when our minds are on the earth, when we eat from the tree of good and evil, we are taking power and control for ourselves. We're deciding what's right and wrong on our own terms—we're attempting to be God.

But that's the tragedy. Becoming like God was always God's intention. His desire has always been to make us like Him. We are made in his image; we are icons of God. Eating the fruit of the tree of life was meant to fill us with His creative power; he wanted us to eat of that fruit then, and he wants us to eat of it now.

That's why Paul is writing to the Philippians through tears. They've been led so far astray that they're eating from the wrong tree—a false tree of life.

And that's why Jesus sounds like his heart is breaking when He says:

³⁴ 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. ³⁵ Look, your house is left to you desolate. I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."^[a]

Jesus is responding to the Pharisees in this passage. And much like the "religious hypocrites" in Philippi that Paul writes about through tears, Jesus speaks in anguish about the hypocrisy of the religious elite who were preventing the Jews from receiving the promise of Abraham. The seed talked about back in Genesis—Jesus—had come! He had come to fulfil the law and bring a new covenant of grace, ushering in a new spiritual kingdom, so that humanity could get back to doing what they were created to do in the garden of Eden: to partner with God and transform the Earth with his goodness. But certain leaders had interpreted God's law from an earthly mindset. They added to it and distorted it; and as a result they couldn't perceive or receive God's word anymore. When the prophets came, they murdered them. When Jesus came, they killed him.

And Jesus cries out, "Oh, if I could just embrace you, cover you with my presence, hold you so close that all you see, breathe, smell, touch, taste is me, you would know

that I am good. You wouldn't doubt it. You wouldn't create hoops for yourself or other people to jump through to gain access to me. You would be right under my wing, living in my goodness, breathing in my presence all of the time."

Jesus is longing to be our life source; because Jesus is the Tree of Life.

In John 15, Jesus says

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

So let's end by returning to the question: Is it possible to think that we are following God when in fact we are living as his enemy? The sad, truthful answer, I believe, is yes. When can lose connection with the vine, when our religion replaces our relationship with God, we are more likely to live from instinct and intuition—our God becomes our gut—and we forget the privilege we have of living from heaven. We live from a place of distance rather than intimacy. We default back into the lie that God is far off and we have to do something to access His presence. That feels like a weighty problem. The solution, however, is this: The Tree of Life is a person—it's Jesus! He is inviting us daily into relationship with him. It is a daily choice to abide; it is a daily choice to renounce the lie that there is any separation between us; it is a daily choice to surrender our earthly understanding of what is good and bad; it is a daily choice to renew our minds from heaven's perspective. It's work, but it's worth it. Is it hard? I'm not so sure. I know I can make it out to be harder than it is, but listen to what Jesus says in John 6:28-29.

²⁸ Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works God requires?'

²⁹ Jesus answered, 'The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.'

If we believe in Jesus, we've done the work of God. That's it. That's all that is required! What a great way to start each and every day. To wake up, seek the beautiful face of Jesus, and rest in the knowledge that we've done the work of the Father.

Isn't that what we want? Didn't we come to Jesus so that we could give up all our striving? I was listening to a talk by Richard Gordon recently, who is the spiritual director of Bethel School of Technology. He said the Jesus we encounter is the Jesus we reveal to the world. If we encounter Jesus as the merciful one who forgave all our sins, we reveal Him as the merciful one. If we encounter Him as the lover of our souls, we reveal Him as our soul-mate. If we encounter Him as the one with supreme authority, we reveal him as "Boss"—the one with ultimate power.

The answer today, every day, for us and for the world, is to come closer to Jesus. To encounter Him afresh. The world is waiting for the revelation of our encounters with Jesus. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

In closing, I want to pray this verse from Colossians 2:7 over us: May our roots grown down deep into you Jesus, may our lives be built on you and you alone. May our faith continue to grow strong in the truth that we were taught, and may our hearts overflow with thankfulness. We love you, Jesus. Amen.