

Good morning and welcome to our virtual church service. In these strange times, fear and anxiety stalks us. We can retreat into every man and woman for their selves or we can look outwards and see the needs of our neighbours. The bible readings that the worldwide church set for today remind us that through our faith we are called to a new way of seeing and a new way of being.

We will start with a prayer and the Lord's Prayer. Frank has kindly sent a prayer to be shared on this day that we do not have a physical service and a prayer for Mothers' day.

So, let us turn to God in Prayer:

Mother and Father God, we come to you in prayer at a time of great uncertainty. We know that we see things in a narrow perspective, limited by our earthly origins and our human nature. We struggle to balance our needs with the needs of others, and the needs of the individual with the needs of wider society.

We think in timespans of human life, which to You are fleeting moments.

We do our best to find the way, Lord, but sometimes we stray. We admit our failings, Lord. We thank you for the assurance brought to us by your son, Jesus Christ, that we can repent and be forgiven.

Help us to serve where service is needed, to accept acts of service with grateful thanks, to pray as Jesus taught us and to remember that 'The eternal God is our refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms.'

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 debts  
as we forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory for ever.

Amen.

Amen

The psalm for today is that most comforting of psalms, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. The image of the shepherd is an ancient one in the bible. It is the image of a good leader, one who is courageous, selfless, attentive to the needs of the people and who guides in wisdom. It is a poem which reminds us that we will not be exempt from the dark times, we all have to go through our dark valleys, but God will be with us.

### **The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.**

<sup>1</sup> The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures;  
he leads me beside still waters;

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk through the darkest  
valley,

I fear no evil;  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff—  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
you anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD  
my whole life long.

We prefer the opening sentiments: green pastures, still waters, the restored soul. What about being led in the paths of righteousness? Have you been up the hills for a walk?

The path is clear because of all the walkers who have gone before and have worn a path to follow? We give thanks for those who have guided us in our faith journey. But there is also the phrase 'stuck in a rut'. About mindlessly following the path that others have trod. We are all guilty of following others, a herd mentality, being like sheep. The psalmist asks, are you in the righteous grooves of God? What might those righteous grooves be? And where are we being led to?

This is a psalm for people who are scarred. Evil is named, the valley of darkness is entered. It feels like there is no escaping it. And yet we hear that God surrounds us in the darkness. I think of those who I have been with when they face death and they quite literally fear no evil, they feel protected. It is a trust in God which is humbling for the rest of us. Perhaps they really know the meaning of the end of this poem. God will follow us, God will pursue us all the days of our lives. God's

kindness and grace will stalk us every day of our lives. It is a love that will not let us go.

Our Gospel reading for today is the longest reading we get from the church. Perhaps it is a reading for when we have time on our hands. It is from John's Gospel the whole of Chapter 9. We can stop off through this long reading for a few thoughts.

This is a healing story. It is always difficult when we look at healing. Some are healed and some are not, and we do not know why. Jesus' healing stories are always about how those excluded from society because of illness are brought back in to society again.

John's stories have layers of meaning and we need to understand the symbolism. In the beginning of this story sin is thought of as a personal problem, the participants persist in asking whose fault was this man's disability. By the end of the story sin is identified as those who seek to exclude others.

The real blindness is the blindness of those who exclude, and that blindness grows and intensifies in the act of exclusion.

### **John 9 The Message (MSG)**

**9** <sup>1-2</sup> Walking down the street, Jesus saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned: this man or his parents, causing him to be born blind?”

*They, just like us, are desperate to know who they can blame, it must be someone’s fault.*

<sup>3-5</sup> Jesus said, “You’re asking the wrong question. You’re looking for someone to blame. There is no such cause-effect here. Look instead for what God can do. We need to be energetically at work for the One who sent me here, working while the sun shines. When night falls, the workday is over. For as long as I am in the world, there is plenty of light. I am the world’s Light.”

*Jesus is saying that not only are they, we, asking the wrong questions, but that we should see in a different way.*

*We have a job to do. In this time of high anxiety your phone calls remind us that we are not alone.*

<sup>6-7</sup> He said this and then spit in the dust, made a clay paste with the saliva, rubbed the paste on the blind man’s eyes, and said, “Go, wash at the Pool of Siloam” (Siloam means “Sent”). The man went and washed—and saw.

*Dust and clay are symbolic of both creation and death; Adam was made from clay and to dust we will return. We have the symbolism of a new creation in this story.*

<sup>8</sup> Soon the town was buzzing. His relatives and those who year after year had seen him as a blind man begging were saying, “Why, isn’t this the man we knew, who sat here and begged?”

<sup>9</sup> Others said, “It’s him all right!”

But others objected, “It’s not the same man at all. It just looks like him.”

*A beggar. We are all beggars just now. Coronavirus is something that we feel*

*powerless to. We come in the form of beggars, begging for help.*

*Those who are homeless just now face an unbearable sense of fear and worry. How easy to dismiss those hidden in full sight: Isn't that the beggar, na can't be. We give thanks for the work of Bethany Christian trust, working with the homeless and especially the team from Bathgate providing food at the night shelter last week.*

He said, "It's me, the very one."

<sup>10</sup> They said, "How did your eyes get opened?"

<sup>11</sup> "A man named Jesus made a paste and rubbed it on my eyes and told me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' I did what he said. When I washed, I saw."

<sup>12</sup> "So where is he?"

"I don't know."

<sup>13-15</sup> They marched the man to the Pharisees. This day when Jesus made the paste and healed his blindness was the Sabbath. (*Oh no,*

*the Sabbath, the holy day, that's going to lead to trouble.*) The Pharisees grilled him again on how he had come to see. He said, "He put a clay paste on my eyes, and I washed, and now I see." (*three times he repeats the story of Jesus' healing, just in case we miss the significance of it*).

<sup>16</sup> Some of the Pharisees said, "Obviously, this man can't be from God. He doesn't keep the Sabbath."

Others countered, "How can a bad man do miraculous, God-revealing things like this?" There was a split in their ranks.

*A split in their ranks? We are all spilt. We don't press the panic button; we are the panic button. We strip the shelves and donate to the needy. We are split now as they were then.*

<sup>17</sup> They came back at the blind man, "You're the expert. He opened *your* eyes. What do you say about him?"

*It feels not like a celebration of a healing but the trial of the man.*

He said, “He is a prophet.”

<sup>18-19</sup> They didn’t believe it, didn’t believe the man was blind to begin with. So they called the parents of the man now bright-eyed with sight. They asked them, “Is this your son, the one you say was born blind? So how is it that he now sees?”

*People with a disability know what it is like to be dismissed; ask their parents as is they don’t have a voice of their own. We remember our friends at Artlink. Over the years we have established meetings to reduce the sense of isolation and now we feel more isolated than ever. But we are exploring with Artlink ways of staying connected.*

<sup>20-23</sup> His parents said, “We know he is our son, and we know he was born blind. But we don’t know how he came to see—haven’t a clue about who opened his eyes. Why don’t you ask him? He’s a grown man and can speak for himself.”

<sup>24</sup> They called the man back a second time—the man who had been blind—and told him, “Give credit to God. We know this man is an impostor.”

<sup>25</sup> He replied, “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see.”

*It really is that simple when our eyes are opened: I was blind, but now I see, I was sick but now I am well, I was homeless but now am housed. I was lonely but now feel blessed. Why does our blindness, hide this simplicity?*

<sup>26</sup> They said, “What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?”

<sup>27</sup> “I’ve told you over and over and you haven’t listened. Why do you want to hear it again? Are you so eager to become his disciples?”

<sup>28-29</sup> With that they jumped all over him. “You might be a disciple of that man, but we’re disciples of Moses. We know for sure that God

spoke to Moses, but we have no idea where this man even comes from.”

*(In times of fear and anxiety we are very quick to question the views of others. But we rarely are willing to question our own views.)*

<sup>30-33</sup> The man replied, “This is amazing! You claim to know nothing about him, but the fact is, he opened my eyes! It’s well known that God isn’t at the beck and call of sinners, but listens carefully to anyone who lives in reverence and does his will. That someone opened the eyes of a man born blind has never been heard of—ever. If this man didn’t come from God, he wouldn’t be able to do anything.”

<sup>34</sup> They said, “You’re nothing but dirt! How dare you take that tone with us!” Then they threw him out in the street.

*Nothing but dirt. This is a creation story, or a re-creation story. God wasn’t finished with the blind man. God isn’t finished with us, and God*

*isn’t finished with humanity. There is still work to be done.*

<sup>35</sup> Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and went and found him. *(Let’s hear that again, Jesus heard that they had thrown him out and went out and found him. Jesus pursued him, a love that will not let us go.)*

He asked him, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” *(the Son of Man, sometimes translated as The Human One, tells us that Jesus came to show us what it is like to be truly human.)*

<sup>36</sup> The man said, “Point him out to me, sir, so that I can believe in him.”

<sup>37</sup> Jesus said, “You’re looking right at him. Don’t you recognize my voice?”

<sup>38</sup> “Master, I believe,” the man said, and worshiped him.

<sup>39</sup> Jesus then said, “I came into the world to bring everything into the clear light of day, making all the distinctions clear, so that those who have never seen will see, and those who have made a great pretence of seeing will be exposed as blind.”

<sup>40</sup> Some Pharisees overheard him and said, “Does that mean you’re calling us blind?”

<sup>41</sup> Jesus said, “If you were really blind, you would be blameless, but since you claim to see everything so well, you’re accountable for every fault and failure.”

A new way of seeing and a new way of being. We are all beggars calling out to the mercy of others. What does not seeing each other, our self-isolation, what insights will this time bring us about God, about ourselves, and about our priorities? How split and divided are we in our response to the other in need? Why are supermarket shelves stripped and foodbank donations still coming in? Whatever happens

and however we cope let us not forget the psalmist’s words that God’s kindness and mercy stalks us every day of our lives. Such amazing grace. I once was blind but now I see.

Let us pray.

God of grace and mercy,

We know that we do not always see the need of our neighbour, we know that we can put ourselves before everyone else, but you know our weaknesses. You know that our hearts break for the pain of the world and sometimes it all feels just too much. We retreat back to our safety.

But you remind us that nothing is safe, and nothing is isolated. The pain of others permeates the thickest of our defences, and then you let us see again, the darkest valley, the green grass, the still waters and we know that you are with us.



Be with those who are on the front line of trying to control this virus. We pray especially for those who cannot be isolated, our care workers, our nurses and doctors; our cleaners and porters, drivers and shop workers. All who keep society ticking over.

We pray for those who are ill and whose anxiety has been heightened by coronavirus. We pray for those who are grieving and worry about how they will bury their loved ones. We pray for those who have no home to retreat to, only the streets for comfort.

For those who thought that they had seen it all, but have seen nothing like this, and as we pray and hope to never experience this again, and beg for release let us all know that all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

Amen

*(Paul Brown, Portobello and Joppa Parish Church facebook page for a moving rendition of Amazing Grace)*

## **Blessing**

