

Prelude A chorale prelude by Bach titled “Wo soll ich fliehen hin?” (Where shall I flee) John Crombie.

Words of welcome:

*The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and those who live in it. All things and all people come from and belong to God. And all that God makes is good. So we take time to worship him, in spirit and in truth, singing first or singing in our hearts the Psalm *Ye Gates lift up your heads on high.**

Hymn: Ye gates lift up your heads on high (19)

Prayer

You are the king of glory, Lord, our God, and as we bow in your presence, so we also are in the courts of your glory, in the radiance of your throne-room. You allow the light of your being to shine on and even through us, the people made in your image. We lift our eyes to you and wonder, we reflect on your goodness and love and we are amazed. We look around us at all that you have made, which sings of your creativity and variety, which brings you praise just by being and we pray that we too, by being, by being what you have made us to be, would bring praise to your name.

You know, Lord God, far better than we know ourselves, that we do not always live in such a way as shows your glory. You know that we occlude your light by selfish thoughts and actions, by excusing ourselves from caring for others, by living with despair and not with your hope. Forgive us for dimming your light in us and around us. Wash us clean again, and shine your light through us to light up the world around.

And hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:
Our Father who art in heaven hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and 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.

Reading: Psalm 24

“The earth is the Lord's” says the Psalmist, and this is the basis of the rest of what that Psalm goes on to say. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, founded and established by God, all of us live within God's handiwork, and enjoy the benefits of his creative skill.

And so God has the right to say what he is looking for in his creation; what are the traits and virtues that he values in the people made in his image. And the Psalm shows, as Scripture shows us so often, that what God values is integrity. Integrity is honesty, truthfulness that goes beyond just not telling lies. It means not lifting up your soul to what is false – not allowing any kind of falseness have a place in your life. It means not acting a lie as well as not speaking one. It means telling the truth even when it is inconvenient. And it means living the truth: ensuring that our lives mirror our beliefs and our words. If we believe that the God we serve is the King of Glory, then our lives should show this – in the way we honour God and in the way we honour all that his glory has created – which is everything and everyone. If we say that God is love, then our lives should be lives of love as well. If, as Jesus taught, we ask God to forgive us when we fail in our integrity, then we should be willing to forgive those who sometimes let us down as well.

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? Who does God seek as the people after his own heart? People of integrity. And they are not so easy to find, sometimes. Integrity is not a quality that can be seen from far away, but only recognised when you get to know a person well, well enough to be allowed to see their whole life – inner and outer. It is the quality that people instinctively look for in our leaders, and seldom find – which is why the press is never short of stories of people who have not done what their previous words might have led us to expect. Conversely, because we know how hard it is to live with integrity, we also find that the press is full of stories which are seeking for a crack in the truth of a public figure's life: perhaps because we would rather pull people down to our own level than be challenged to raise our game to match theirs.

Integrity was what made Jesus stand out from other teachers and leaders of his time, what both attracted and repelled people. Right from the beginning of his ministry.

Reading: Mark 1:21-34

Hymn: When Jesus saw the fishermen in boats upon the sea (340)

When Jesus called the fishermen, all that they knew was that they were to follow him and become fishers of people. But they knew enough of Jesus that this was all they needed to know, and so they left their nets and followed Jesus; and he led them just along the shore to Capernaum. The longest journey starts with a single step, and you don't know where the road may lead you. The journey of discipleship began, very conventionally, with a trip to the synagogue. So far so expected. Where else would a good Jew go, and a good rabbi even more so, on the Sabbath?

He led them into the synagogue and there they began to see what they had taken on. Mark tells us that Jesus taught. We have no idea why Jesus was asked to teach here. Capernaum, as we find out later, was where he was living, so he would be known there, and it may be that he had already become one of those who were asked to teach in the synagogue – preaching rotas did not come into being with the modern church! Maybe this was a regular slot – or maybe this was his first attempt. It doesn't matter. What matters is the response: people acknowledged Jesus' authority.

There is a difference between authority and authoritarianism. There is nowhere in Scripture where we see Jesus being authoritarian: wielding power for its own sake, enforcing his will just because he can. The authority Jesus had was the force of integrity and to have acted in an authoritarian way would have been to give the lie to his message. It would have given the wrong picture of the kingdom of God, no matter what words he spoke about it, if he had made demands of people just because he was the Son of God. How we are, and how we speak and act is important.

Jesus spoke, and as we see, acted, with authority. He spoke the truth and the truth carries its own authority. You have heard of "the ring of truth" that people recognise. Jesus spoke and, like the pealing of a bell, people hear the ring of truth. And hearing it they realised that they did not always hear it, in the synagogue or out of it. The poor possessed man heard it and recognised it and called it out – such integrity is the mark of the presence of God and something in him knew it! And it was because of his integrity that Jesus would not allow acknowledgement from that source: what the man's words said were true, but people thought of him as being possessed by evil and Jesus knew that to have the endorsement of what was seen as evil would not help people to hear what he had to say and to see what he had to show of a life lived with God.

(Later, in fact, this was to be a problem, as people began to say that he could only cast out demons by the power of evil.)

The new disciples would be watching and listening. What would they make of this encounter? Were they wondering what they were supposed to learn, or were they just taking it in as amazed bystanders? Either way, it was a part of their training and would feed into what they would come to understand of their calling and the one that they were called to follow. He spoke with authority because his life and words were at one: this was how he was later able to say that he was the truth.

“I will make you fish for people” had been the disciples’ calling, and that first day of discipleship showed that this meant all kinds of people – the wild and possessed, the sick mother-in-law, the crowds who came to get what they could, who came seeking the health that they craved, the fullness of life that was denied them. It involved helping all who needed help that day, but doing it without accepting the wild tributes which would have seemed to align him with evil. There were to be no shortcuts to the revelation of his truth. And his followers would have to learn to avoid shortcuts as well.

Shortcuts are the enemy of integrity. When I was a teenager at school, I opted to take cross country running for Games lesson, because I hated hockey. And one of the temptations of the cross country group, which, I am ashamed to say I did not always resist, was that since we were only supervised when in the school grounds, and the route we were sent to run involved leaving those grounds and taking country roads, there were places where we could leave the appointed route and walk through a field or a wood, to come out onto the route again, without the effort of running round the longer way. Shortcuts are the enemy of integrity, whether it is the shortcut that deceived the teachers (though I expect they weren’t as clueless as we thought them); or the shortcut that pretends to do the work ourselves but really gets someone else to do it for us; or the shortcut that means that you pass off the ready-made meal as your own cooking – or, well, you could add your own examples I am sure. They may not be venal, but shortcuts are the enemy of integrity.

There are no shortcuts to following Jesus: no ways that you can fast-track your following, because discipleship and being a Christian is based on developing a relationship with God and being church is about developing relationships with other disciples. And only time spent with someone can foster a relationship: time spent with God, time spent with other followers. Human beings are so often in a hurry, and that is the temptation of the shortcut. But the earth is the Lord’s and he has literally all the time in the world for us to learn to know him and to follow Jesus his son.

The new disciples’ first lesson in learning to fish for people, which was what Jesus called them to do, was that they should live and act with the authority of truth. It is as surprising now as it was then.

Hymn: God be in my head (538)

Prayer

Lord God who calls us to follow you with integrity, we ask that you be in our heads, that we apply our minds to seeking and following Jesus. We pray that you keep us from living in mindless patterns laid down by habit or by society, but that day by day you help us to lay 24 hours before you and seek to live in your way, whether there are things we must do, commitments to be fulfilled, or whether we have the freedom to use our time as we wish.

God who made all that we can see, we pray that you be in our eyes and speak to us in what we see and how we look at your world. Help us to see clearly: to see ourselves, our faults for correction but also our forgiveness and our chosen-ness by you. Help us to see your image in others and your patterns in the world around us. Help us to look to see how we may share your love in life, with those we live amongst.

God, who spoke, and the world came to be, we pray that you will be in our mouths and in all that we say. Teach us to live with truth and integrity patterning our lives. Give us courage to speak up for what we know is right, even if we think that will not be popular. Teach us to be bold in proclaiming your love. And give us the grace to be silent when we are tempted to make the snarky or negative comment.

God, your Son Jesus lived from the truth in his heart. And we pray that you will also be in our hearts, at the centres of our beings. We pray too for those we know who do not know you in their lives and who are seeking for something to fill an ache of emptiness in their hearts. May they come to know you, and find you filling their heart with your life and your joy.

Lord God, you made us for life, and you made us for yourself. We remember that this life is not for ever and we pray that as we live with you through our days, so you will be preparing us for finding you at their end and at our departing. And we pray for those who draw near to such a time, whether they are aware of it or not. We pray for them and for their families, that they may be strengthened by your presence and your love.

Hear our prayers, offered in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn: Breathe on me breath of God (596)

Benediction

May the truth of God dwell in your heart today and always.
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest on you and remain with you. Amen.

Postlude Minuet in E flat by Handel played on the organ in the Manse by Alan Buchan