

Prelude: “Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier” or Dearest Jesus we are here, by Sigfrid Karg-Elert.

Words of welcome:

At all times we are in the presence of God. At all times we can turn to him with reverence and worship. At all times we can know his guiding, loving presence. At this time let us worship God by singing the hymn

Hymn: Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty

Prayer:

Lord God, who invites us to come to you at any time and who delights in being present with us at all times, as we pause to remind ourselves of your presence, we also remind ourselves of your holiness. You are the perfection of all goodness and love, all justice and righteousness, all compassion and mercy. We worship your perfection and marvel at the holiness of your being.

As we come to you, we thank you for bringing your holiness near to us in Jesus, and for inviting us to know your holiness even within ourselves by your Spirit. It is incredible that we fallen people should yet be allowed to house your Spirit of perfection, the Spirit of Jesus himself.

Forgive us when we do not let your holiness shine through our lives, to others or to ourselves. Forgive us when we do or say or think things which are not worthy of your presence with us. Teach us daily to know you more clearly, love you more dearly and follow you more nearly.

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 and the power and the glory for ever.

Amen.

Over the past few weeks we have begun to look at what it is we do when we say we worship God. We saw how worship arises from our deep desire to give back to God, not as God gives to us, which is impossible, but in gratitude for his giving: to give offerings, sacrificially, of money or produce, of our time, of our attention. And we looked at the place music and singing has in worship, in helping us express the emotions we feel, whether of joy or of doubt or of sorrow. But worship is not just about what we do on a Sunday morning. It is not gathering for prayer and singing, Bible reading and a sermon. In fact, these things are not “worship” at all if we are not worshipping in Spirit and in truth – we always come back to that. It is not just about what the people of God do when they gather together, and it never has been.

Hear what some of the ancient prophets of Israel had to say to their people about the rituals of worship which were practiced.

Readings: Isaiah 58:6-12

Amos 5:21-24

Micah 6:6-8

Reading these prophets, we realise that while true worship may be fulfilled in one way by our Sunday services, that can only be the case if we also worship in how we live every part of our lives.

Isaiah is talking about the Israelite practice of regular fasting. And he says that fasts, and this could probably be true of any religious practice, fasts which are supposed to be pleasing to God, can actually become abhorrent if the worshipper's way of life is not in line with his or her religious observance. If you take his words in reverse, you can see that Isaiah has been seeing people fasting, possibly ostentatiously, so that everyone knows what they are doing : Jesus describes people marking themselves with ashes and wearing long faces so that everyone will know that they are fasting. People have been fasting but at the same time they have been actively involved in oppressing those who are poorer than themselves, or making life harder for others, being selfish with the good things God has given them, and refusing even to have much to do with their own families. That, says Isaiah, is no fast, not worship, not pleasing to God at all.

His point is that it doesn't matter what religious practices people follow, they aren't pleasing to God if their lives do not also express their worship: if their lives are not lived in a way that shows God's values of love and justice.

Amos says that God even hates religious services and festivities if the people taking part in them do not live with justice and righteousness – the religious festivals might as well be pagan if the people do not live with God shaping all their lives. While Micah reminds people that God is not asking them to give more than they ought, that it is not the amount or the sacrifice of our gifts which pleases him, but the way that we live our lives humbly in his presence, doing justice and loving kindness.

One of the best ways of expressing this view of worship is found in Paul's letter to the Colossians, where he says this:

Reading: Colossians 3:12-17

Paul is talking of being a Christian, of living as a Christian as something that we do as naturally as we put on our clothes every morning. We get out of bed, and he says we must clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Garbing ourselves in these qualities of mind should be as natural to us as putting on our socks. In fact - here's a thought - you could make your getting dressed in the morning into a bit of a prayer ritual, asking God with each garment you don, to help you also don the qualities of mind, the ways of living, that reflect him and his loving forgiveness.

Paul explains that these qualities will prompt us to bear with each other – just because we are Christians doesn't mean that we all find each other always delightful! - and to forgive each other. And then he says that whatever else we put on, we should not consider ourselves clothed unless we also put on love. If we were to think of these things and pray about these things as we got ready every morning, what a difference it might make to the beginning and the middle and the end of our days!

And what has that to do with worship? It has everything to do with it. The formal worship we present to God, the time we give him, the offerings of gratitude, the songs of our hearts, are worth very little if they are just an expression of a fleeting moment, while the rest of our lives are lived to please ourselves. But if we put on the qualities of God each day, and live them out in our lives, then the times we can offer God formal worship will mean so much more – both to us and to God; and the activity of our lives, lived in God's way, will also be a pleasing act of worship to God.

Paul encourages his readers to let God's word dwell deep in our hearts and to sing our faith, but, he concludes, what is most important is this: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (v:17) Whatever you do – gardening, or shopping, or talking with people, or reading, or walking or watching, or whatever! It is the life lived in the name of the Lord Jesus which is the Christian life, not the one which gives God intermittent attention, but the one which brings God into every part of life. The worship of God is a whole-time occupation, which does not distract from, but in fact enhances the rest of life.

Hymn: Fill thou my life, O Lord, my God

Before we turn to prayer for others, a word about the next steps which our churches are going to be taking. Starting tomorrow, Monday 3rd August, we are going to be holding weekly prayer services. Because opening even one building in line with the Covid 19 regulations is quite a task, we have decided to hold these services only in St. Bride's for now, but they are for anyone from our three communities (Dalwhinnie counting as part of the Laggan community!). We are going to hold weekly prayer services, but twice a week – which sounds odd, but it will be the same service offered on two different occasions. Because it is easier to comply with the cleaning needed between services if we have a 72 hour gap, we will be holding the services on Mondays at 6.30 p.m. and Thursdays at 7.30 p.m. And please, please you need to let me know if you are coming and to which service, so that I can make sure that we will not have too many people attending any one service. There is a limit on the numbers we can accommodate, even in St. Bride's, which is the building we can fit most people in with social distancing. Phone or email me, but let me know.

When you come – and I hope you will come, but that must be your decision, based on your own feeling of safety – please bring and wear a mask. You will be asked sanitise your hands on entering and leaving and will be asked to sit as far forward as possible. By the way, we have moved the chairs around, so that St. Bride's looks a bit different: that is to help with the needed 2 metre spacing. Oh, and we are urged to keep the place well-ventilated, so wear a coat....

If you are wondering what a prayer service is, it is one where the main activity is prayer. Some of that will be what you might think of as traditional church prayer, led from the front. Some may be in silence, some might be in responsive reading, some could be in the form of prayerful activity. It will not be like a "normal" Sunday service, though as we explore this format over the weeks it may give us some ideas about what a new normal might include.

As we see how things go with one building, we will look to opening up the other two in time.

I look forward to seeing many of you in church over the next weeks, but remember please do let me know first which service you are coming to, either phone me or email. All are, as ever, welcome, but not all can be accommodated safely and legally at the one time!

Hymn: Christ be beside me

Prayer:

Lord God, who asks us to do everything to your glory, we bring to you the many everythings that make up our days. We bring you the daily rituals of waking and resting, of eating and cleaning, of meetings and solitude. Lord God who is in everything, be also in these things.

We bring you the matters which occupy our minds: our families and friends; our health and well-being; the progress of this Covid pandemic around the world and here in our small corner. We know that everything is known by you and held by you and nothing is outwith your grace. Lord God who is in everything, be also in these things.

We bring you our community, with the people who live around us and the matters which concern us as a community. We bring to you the visitors who stay for a while or those who pass through, asking for your presence and protection on them. We bring you the people who know that in this hard time they may be facing difficulties now and in the months to come. Lord God who is in everything, be also in these things.

We bring you our church, asking that as we begin to try out how we might meet despite restriction you will give us joy at being together in your presence again. We pray for those of us who will not feel safe to meet with others, that they might not feel left out. We pray for the safe coming together of your people and ask that the sense of your presence might outweigh the changes and difficulties. And we pray for the churches near to us and for our brothers and sisters in Libis and Kostalec, that all of us would know your leading and blessing as we seek to take your church forward into the present and the future. Lord God who is in everything, be also in these things.

We pray for Jesus' sake, Amen.

Hymn: Lord of creation to you be all praise

Benediction

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

And the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you now and always. Amen.

Postlude: Bach's Toccata in D Minor