

*Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends*

*The 21st Sunday after Pentecost
17 October 2021*

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: Let us shine with the light of Christ in the world,

P: holding fast to the Word of Life.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, Lord of heaven and earth, we praise you. You show wisdom in all your works. You show your truth in Jesus Christ, your Son. And you share your life with us through the grace and peace of your own Holy Spirit. We honour your name, and we offer our worship, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Living God, your mercy searches our hearts. You know us as we are. Hold before us a vision of the people you call us to be, and the life you call us live. Forgive the poverty of our love, the times when we have neglected your claim upon us and turned our backs on each other. Make us want to reach for your mercy. Show us the path you would have us walk, the truth you would have us know, and the life you call us to live.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us

Almighty and everlasting God, in Christ you revealed your glory among the nations. Preserve the works of your mercy, that your Church throughout the world may persevere with steadfast faith in the confession of your Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Awaken us to your truth, O Lord, and open our minds to the movement of your Spirit, speaking through your Word, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 104: 1-13 (*God is Creator and Provider*)

Bless the Lord, O my soul.

O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honour and majesty,
wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
you set the beams of your chambers on the waters,
you make the clouds your chariot,
you ride on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers,
fire and flame your ministers.
You set the earth on its foundations,
so that it shall never be shaken.
You cover it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains.
At your rebuke they flee;
at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.
They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys
to the place that you appointed for them.
You set a boundary that they may not pass,
so that they might not again cover the earth.
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills,
giving drink to every wild animal;
the wild asses quench their thirst.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains;
the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St Mark 10: 35-45 (*Jesus teaches the meaning of greatness.*)

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'

And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?'

And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'

But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'

They replied, 'We are able.'

Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized; but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'

When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.'

'For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 10:38 *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink."*

Jesus called James and John 'the Sons of Thunder' because they were noisy and ambitious. They asked a big favour. They'd glimpsed Jesus' glory on the mountaintop. Moses and Elijah were at his side. Maybe they, too, could get a selfie with Jesus – James on one side, John on the other.

People do this when they meet celebrities. "Can I have a photo with you?" they ask. It's not enough to get a snapshot from a distance. They want to be in the photo *with* them, to partake of their fame in a second-hand way, to glow in *their* glory. They casually show their friends that photo, and say, "Yup, that's me and Al Pacino."

By the way, did you know I once spent an evening with Prime Minister Trudeau (the former one). He'd been out of office for a decade by then. We conversed at length at

a small dinner party (I was one of four) in a private home in Montreal. A few weeks later our paths crossed on the street, and he stopped to talk some more. "Not now, Pierre," I said, "I have a busy parish to run!" No, I didn't say that! Neither do I have a 'selfie' with him, so you'll just have to take my word for it. But if you *do* believe me, don't you see me differently now? Don't I glow a bit more? (Don't answer. Some of you are whispering, "You've sunk even lower in our eyes," aren't you?)

People like James and John thrive on ambition because ambition already thrives in them. But ambitious people can be as annoying as a car that weaves in and out of traffic, bent on getting ahead of everyone else. This is how the other disciples looked on those 'Sons of Thunder'. Who do they think *they* are, asking for plush seats next to Jesus? "And they began to be angry with them," says St Mark.

Why, I wonder? *Jesus* doesn't mind their ambition. Only, he asks them to *reorient* it. They have their 'eyes on the prize', do they? Good for them. But are they ready for the hardship it will cost them on the way? How many young men 'signed up' in time of war, lured by patriotism, comradeship, the chance to fire a gun and wear a uniform with medals, enthralled by tales of heroism and glory, but paid no heed to the horror of war and its terrible cost?

"Are you aware of the cost of following me?" Jesus asked them. "Do you know yourselves well enough to say 'yes' to me? Are you ready to spend and be spent – not to kill, but to love, perhaps to die, not for wealth but for justice, not for fame but for peace? I can see that you want to hoist the winner's cup. Good for you. But can you drain that cup to the bitter dregs? Are you able to drink the cup that *I* drink?," he asked them.

"The cup that I drink." Why does Jesus mention a cup? The cup stands for our experience of life, the bitter and the sweet. When the psalmist says, "my cup runneth over", he's rejoicing at the *goodness* of life, its abundance and blessing. That's real. When a team wins a championship, they also win a Cup – the Stanley Cup or the Grey Cup, let's say. Maybe they've lost many times on the long road to victory. There have been injuries, too. But because the whole team toils and sweats and suffers and never gives up until the final buzzer sounds, they all share in that one victory. They take turns hoisting the cup, and each one drinks from it.

But the cup is a symbol for life's most terrible trials too (because terrible trials and joyous victories so often involve each other). When Jesus knelt in the garden and prayed, "Take this *cup* from me", he meant, "Father, I'm in agony. Take away this terrible, terrible suffering." In that moment Jesus, too, felt all but lost. Yet he drank it. His ambition led him there, because his ambition was God's call and claim upon him. His ambition was, from the outset, properly *oriented*. It was good and true, from top to bottom. "Not my will but thine be done," he prayed. And he drank the cup.

Life has a way of summoning us the way Jesus summoned his followers. They're little calls to discipleship, to face hard things we know we ought to do, to quit a job, to end a relationship, to stand up for something unpopular, to deal with an addiction. We

may feel called to do these things. We know they're right and good, and for that reason we *desire* them. But they're a cup of suffering, too, and we cannot summon the courage, and we will not drink it.

Maybe you know the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. They made it their cause to search for the Holy Grail, the cup Jesus drank from at the Last Supper. They believed it would renew their kingdom and restore their glory. But the legend says that each knight had to embark on their own private quest. Each had to enter the forest to face danger and death at the place where the forest seemed darkest to him, and to him alone. And that's a storybook way of saying that each knight had to do battle with what *he* feared the most. They had to face their *own* darkness, each one. They had to suffer trials that threatened to stop them in their tracks, to face fears that could strangle their ambition – not their *desire* for glory, but their willingness to *act* on their desire. But without a willingness to act on our desires, our lives are an idle dream, a fog of ineffective wishful thinking.

So, I think Jesus applauded the ambition of James and John, yes, but first he took it apart and put it back together in a different way. He *reoriented* their ambition with these two questions. First: "Do you *know* the dark forest you must go through?" And second: "Are you able?" And even though they didn't know what they were in for – because, who does? – they said, "Yes, we can."

We can say this too, but more. We don't have to enter the dark bit of the woods all alone. Remember that old Welsh hymn?

*When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.*

Or we could put it this way. Picture this. There's a seat for each of us next to Jesus at the Table of the Lord. There we may converse with him, share in his feast of love and sorrow, and to tell him all about ours. When we take that seat, he places his cup before us. He's our Lord because that cup holds *our* life's whole quest and ambition, the fulfilment of the hopes and dreams we've lived for (or tried to). We're bound to reach for that cup with hands trembling from fear and excitement. For its contents are complex, like a *good* wine, with notes both bitter and sweet, like *life* itself. For this 'Holy Grail' imparts a Suffering Love, a Divine Love, and Infinite Joy.

George Herbert said it beautifully in a poem called "The Agony" (it's about drinking life's truth as if from a cup):

*Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood; but I as wine.*

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, our duty and joy is to offer your thanks and praise, the devotion of our lives in service, and the thoughts of our hearts in solemn prayer.

We thank you for the gift of the Church universal, in every time and place; for making us your children by adoption and grace, for feeding us with the bread of life, and for the faith handed on to us by those who have gone before.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, keep the door of this sanctuary Church wide enough to receive all who hunger and thirst for you, all who seek your love and friendship; but keep out all envy and strife. Let the door to this house of prayer be a gateway to your presence.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace throughout the world, an end to hatred and bitter fear that leads to war, and a breaking of the power of evil, in every land and in our own hearts. By the power of your Spirit, reconcile us to yourself and to others of every colour and culture, that we may no longer be strangers or enemies, but friends and fellow citizens within your kingdom.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for ourselves, in our relations with others. Guard us in our speaking and listening, O Lord. Shield us from hasty words, mean accusations, and disregard for truth spoken in love, in our families, with our friends, and in all our relationships

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O God, ever faithful, who have knit together as one body in Christ all who have been your people in every time and place, keep us in communion with your saints, following the example of faith and life of those who came before us. Then bring us, with them, to the joy you have prepared for us...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, why should we wait for our hearts to be changed, in order to come to you? You change them, day by day, without our knowing how. You have all that is needed to heal us. Help us to live well in this world, and rejoice in the world to come, where we shall find enduring reason to offer praise, world without end.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

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, forever. Amen

Benediction

(Said together) **The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. *Amen***