

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

*The 4th Sunday in Lent*  
*14 March 2021*

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

*Opening Words*

L: Jesus said: I am the light of the world.

**P: Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.**

L: Let us worship God.

*Prayers of Adoration and Confession*

Eternal God, you are greater than our thoughts can know, higher than our words can tell, and more merciful than our hearts can believe. Open our eyes to the glory of your presence, attune our ears to the sound of your voice, loosen our tongues in joy of your worship, and fill our lives with love and praise.

Holy One, your mercy is eternal. You open your arms to accept us even before we turn to meet your welcome; you invite us into your forgiveness even before our hearts are softened to repentance. Make us aware of good and evil, within and around us. Help us to believe and trust that no wrong we have done, and no good we have failed to do, is too great for your pardon.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

**P: Christ, have mercy upon us.**

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Everlasting God, in whom we live and move and have our being, you have made us for yourself so that our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose, so that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will, and no fear may keep us from doing it; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

*An Assurance of Pardon*

L: "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that world might be saved through him." 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*** God of wisdom, illumine our minds. God of light, shine into our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22** (*Thanksgiving for Healing*)

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
     for his steadfast love endures for ever.  
 Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,  
     those he redeemed from trouble  
 and gathered in from the lands,  
     from the east and from the west,  
     from the north and from the south.  
 Some were sick through their sinful ways,  
     and because of their iniquities endured affliction;  
 they loathed any kind of food,  
     and they drew near to the gates of death.  
 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
     and he saved them from their distress;  
 he sent out his word and healed them,  
     and delivered them from destruction.  
 Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
     for his wonderful works to humankind.  
 And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,  
     and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

*(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 John 3: 14-21** (*A summary of the Gospel*)

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

**P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St John 3:16** *"God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son."*

Years ago, when the camera panned the crowd at a sports event, you'd sometimes see a handmade sign. "JOHN 3:16," it shouted. The sign-holder hoped we'd be curious enough to look it up in the Bible, and we'd read the Good News of the Gospel, maybe for the very first time.

And why not? It's a fine summary of the Gospel, if such a thing were possible: "God so loved that he gave his only-begotten Son."

Notice that John doesn't just say 'God is Love' and leave it at that. He says, "God *so* loved". God loves in a specific way, in other words. God loves by sending his only Son into the world.

Why?

"First let me tell you why *not*," says John. "It's not to condemn the world."

OK, good to know. But *why* then?

"That the world might be saved through him, that's why."

As a summary of the gospel, that's not bad at all. We need this Gospel. It corrects and clarifies our lives. For we can't seem to stop ourselves from living as though our worth in God's sight depends on *us*, on *our* doing – as though God's loving acceptance is something we must *acquire*, like a job, and *achieve*, like success. It's as though God is the boss of all bosses whom we must do our best to impress. Except it's never enough.

It's no wonder we feel this way. In too many areas of life our feelings of joy and sorrow come down to this: how well are we liked, how much do we earn, how hard do we work? Like a spring bent for so long that it loses its power to rebound, our lives are bent by relentless attempts at more and greater achievement, to prove our worth, to exhibit our value. Our *lives* are bent out of shape.

But that life is not the Christian life. The Christian life begins as it ends, with God's gift of love and acceptance. It doesn't begin with trying to be 'good' (supposing

we know what this means). After all, the Gospel stories are full of religious people who can't see goodness incarnate when he's standing right in front of them. What makes us think we'd see any better?

God acts first. That's the point. Faith answers God's initiative. It follows in the wake of God's giving. So, faith's very first act must be accepting and receiving. Everything else grows from this root: accepting and receiving what God alone can give.

"Does this mean faith should never bear fruit in lives that *give* and *do*?"

Of course not.

"Shouldn't we become, you know, 'better people'?"

Perhaps, if we can discover what 'better' means.

"Shall we work and pray for a world that embodies God's justice and peace?"

Yes, if we dare. But we'll do it not to *convince* God to love the world, but precisely *because* God loves the world.

Very well. If the 'root action' of our faith is to accept and receive God's gift, then the 'root sin' is to spurn that gift. For that, as St John says, would be "to love darkness rather than light."

Misdeeds and failures and shortcomings and mistakes are *not* the root of sin. The root of all sin is *spurning the gift*. Because, if the gift is spurned, then the very root of our faith in God – accepting and receiving – is ripped from the soil of our soul. No good fruit can grow there now. Whatever gets put in its place will be a sham and a fake. *That's* the real sin. Spurning the gift.

Nothing is sadder, in literature or in life, than those scenes where a child or lover, out of sheer adoration, or maybe hero-worship, makes a little gift with their own two hands. This gift has their whole self behind it, and it's all for the pleasure of the one they love like mad – *and that gift is spurned*.

Think of Jesus Christ, then. Beyond the appalling pain of nails driven through hands and feet, we can add this 'mental pain' Jesus must have felt on the cross – the pain of a lover whose gift has been spurned and spat upon.

"For this is judgment," says St John. "The light came into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light." They turned their backs on him. They refused his gift.

Sometimes, when we sit still in the darkness, we begin to see things about ourselves, things invisible in the clear light of day – our cowardly heart, our twisted fears, our 'shadows'.

If you travel by train, watching the landscape rush by as darkness falls, the window gradually becomes a mirror. The objects that appear to be outside are really reflections of what's inside the train carriage. If you press your face close to the darkness outside the window, all you can see is your reflection staring back at you.

Wasn't this true of the darkness that fell on a Jerusalem hill on the first Good Friday? Isn't it a mirror too? It seems to be a story about *other* people killing Jesus, spurning the gift a long time ago. But if we dare to keep company with that cross, at the

darkest hour that ever was, we may be shocked to see a reflection of our own face in the angry mob.

Have we spurned God's gift? That's too painful to contemplate. But that's also why we must worship God on Good Friday before we dare to worship God on Easter morning.

What can be greater than a lover who gives his or her whole self for the beloved? I'll tell you what's greater. It's a love that gives its whole self and, though spurned and rejected, *still loves*, world without end.

There *will* be an Easter morning.

### ***Prayers of Intercession***

We lift up our hearts to offer the Church's praise and thanksgiving. Hear us now, as we prayer for the world, through Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for the Church, and for the renewal and healing of Elmwood Avenue Church, now and on that day when we emerge from the pandemic. How long, O Lord?

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Holy God, hear the people who call to you in their need, and lead your Church from the shadows of death and despair. Keep us gathered in your fold, that we may grow together in faith and love, and then give thanks to you with voices united for your loving kindness in our lives.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the same yesterday, today and forever. You stilled the storm, fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, and healed the sick. Make known your grace and power in our day. Calm our restless hearts with your words of peace, satisfy the hunger of our souls, make our lives whole and strong, and rescue us from evil.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Because it would cheer Christ's heart, we pray for those who are treated as less than human; those who are only numbers in a faceless bureaucracy; those who are imprisoned for their beliefs; those who are discriminated against because of race or disability; and those whose labour is exploited. Rescue them from oppression. Help us make the world just and humane.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who despair of life, for those whose lives seem lifeless, who carry heavy burdens of guilt and regret, for those who are dying and those who would

prefer to die. Invade their despair with your loving presence. Lift them from feelings of futility and help them to know your purpose for them.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ, tirelessly you seek out those who are looking for you. Seek also for those who fear your heart has gone cold, who think that you are far away from them, and you have ceased to care. Show us that while we are still searching for you, you have already found us. And teach us, at every moment, to trust our whole selves to your care and keeping.

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

We remember those who have died, both those whose death we grieve, and those now forgotten by anyone on earth, but remembered and loved by you...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

**P: Hear our prayer**

God, rich in mercy, you so loved the world that when we were dead in our sins, you sent your only Son for our deliverance. Lifted up from the earth, he is light and life; exalted upon the cross, he is truth and salvation. Open our hearts to his truth, that we may know your Son alive within us, redeeming us, and raising us up to eternal life.

As our Saviour has taught, 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, for ever. 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**