

twelvebaskets



ORDINARY 12A

A complete Sunday service ready to use
for worship and inspire ideas in your church

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Fourth Sunday After Pentecost - Year A
25th June 2023



Order of Service

Call to worship

Hymn:

565 STF – Only by grace can we enter OR

595 STF – Lord, we have come at your own invitation

Opening Prayers

The Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

Hymn:

463 STF – Deep in the shadows of the past OR

629 STF – God of my faith, I offer you my doubt

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Hymn:

303 STF – I know that my Redeemer lives OR

289 STF – When my love for Christ grows weak

Reflections on the readings

Hymn:

489 STF – All I once held dear, built my life upon OR

250 STF – Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult

Intercessions

Offering / collection

Blessing the offering

Hymn:

673 STF – Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? OR

503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

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Call to worship

Gracious God, your love has called us here, and here we come, gathering in your name.

Gracious God, we open our hearts and minds and eyes up to you again this day, as we come to you in worship.

As we worship, Lord, transform and renew us. Awaken our spirits, show and inspire us to respond to your love by spreading love into the world, in Jesus' name

Amen.¹

Hymn:

565 STF – Only by grace can we enter OR

595 STF – Lord, we have come at your own invitation

Opening Prayers

O Lord my God,

We have gathered here, in awesome wonder,
To worship and praise your name.

Not because you need our worship, but because the joy of your love for us flows out of us, in song, in prayer, in how we respond to our gathering today.

O Lord my God,

We have gathered here, to give you thanks, for the many blessings we have received.

Let us share together what we are thankful for – please call out the things that you are giving thanks for today.

[Invite people to share what they are thankful for. You might like to share your own.]

Thank you.

Loving God, amongst all that has been shared out loud, and thought in our heads, and felt in our hearts – we know that you can hear our praise and thanks.

Loving God, help us to live a life of gratitude. To say 'thank you' for all that we have received, over and over again this week.

Living, loving God,

We come to you in worship, knowing that there have been times this week when we have fallen short of your glory,

When we have failed to live up to your hopes for our lives,

When we have said and done things we regret, or have stayed silent or inactive when we could have spoken up or stood up against injustice.

In the stillness, we bring our 'sorrrys' to you, Lord God.

[Pause].

¹ Call to worship written by Tim Baker

Even as we confess our sins, we know that you have already forgiven us,
That we are loved and accepted just as we are,
But we keep up this practice of naming our mistakes, because it helps us to grow, to
be accountable, to be honest with ourselves and with you, Lord God.

Thank you, for your grace, already reaching out to us for the week ahead.

Bless us now, as we worship, in Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

All Age Talk

How would you describe God? What does your experience of God feel like? Do you have some words, phrases, ideas or images that help you explain what the divine means to you?

These can be tricky questions, can't they? But wherever you are on your journey with God, whether you have been a firm believer all your life, or are just beginning (or beginning again) to ask questions about the nature of God and spirituality, it can be difficult to find the words to describe God. Just spend a moment now, turn to the person sitting next to you – or the people either side of you – and see if you can come up with a few words or an image to describe something about God.

What words come into your head when I ask you to imagine God?

[Pause for people to talk].

Let's hear some of your ideas... *[spend some time talking about some of the words and phrases that are generated: do other people find them helpful, have you got lots of similar words or some that are very different? If there are children and young people in the congregation, pay particular attention to some of their ideas.]*

In churches, and in the history of the Christian religion, people have often tried to make describing God and explaining spirituality a very complicated and academic process. They have used long words, technical terms and difficult ideas to try to get to grips with who God is. Of course, the development of 'theology' is a crucial part of how Christianity has grown and continues to find ways to respond to a changing world. However, we must make sure that we don't make God more complicated than God already is...

Jesus has some harsh and difficult words for family life this week, and challenges us to think about 'losing our life' in order to gain everything. But we also know he created space to let the 'little children come to him' and reassures us that unless we 'receive the kingdom of God like a little child', we will not really understand who God is. Perhaps sometimes church is too complicated for its own good? Do we have to understand it all, all of the time, or can we sit with the discomfort of not-knowing?

² Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

The Christian writer Marcus Borg told a story about some friends who had a small child and a tiny baby. Their child asked to have a moment alone with the baby and the parents heard the child saying to the newborn: 'Tell me about God, I've almost forgotten what He's like...'

Perhaps we all need to be reminded what God looks like by people we might not expect. Can we look out for God in unexpected places this week, as we continue to learn more about how we can be followers of Jesus today?³

Hymn:

463 STF – Deep in the shadows of the past OR
629 STF – God of my faith, I offer you my doubt

Readings: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Hymn:

303 STF – I know that my Redeemer lives OR
289 STF – When my love for Christ grows weak

Reflections on the readings

Every day during filming, a television show or film has a “call sheet” containing all the information to shoot the next day’s scenes. The first actor listed on the call sheet is the star – they’re getting paid the most, they’re the most important person in that day’s story. They can make things happen, or stop them from happening. They set the tone for everyone else on the set.

If the story of Genesis 21 was made into a tv show or movie, who would be at the top of the call sheet? (*Note to preacher: you may wish to ask this question and encourage people to respond to you, or to the person sitting next to them.*) Would it be Abraham, the Father of Nations? Or the baby playing Isaac, the promised Son? It might even be Sarah, in a story of trust, or toddler Ishmael, who also grew up to found a nation?

I doubt it’s Hagar. Hagar is, for sure, at the bottom of the call sheet. Hagar isn’t the hero, she’s not the plucky best friend, or the loyal spouse. Hagar is, in many translations, described as a handmaiden or servant. In Shakespeare, such servants are usually either comedic relief or scheming characters and when we read Genesis 16 we might assume she is the latter. The Bible says that when Hagar finds out she is pregnant, she began to despise Sarah. I imagine most people’s assumption reading this story is that she does so because she becomes haughty and ‘above herself’, thinking she is better than Sarah now that she has a son. But why do we think this? Is it because we assume Abraham and Sarah are at the top of the call sheet – that they’re the heroes?

Let’s imagine for a moment that for Genesis 21, Hagar is at the top of the call sheet – that she’s the most important person in the story. What do we actually know about

³ All Age Talk written by Tim Baker

her? She's Egyptian, so how did she end up with Sarah? We know that Abraham and Sarah had lived for a while in Egypt. Perhaps they started employing her there, but it's more likely that she was a slave. She is presented with almost no agency in the Bible – she is ordered by Sarah to sleep with Abraham and forced to bear his child. How would you feel if you were Hagar? It's perhaps not surprising that when she discovered she was pregnant, she hated Sarah.

Then, having been forced to bear this child (who no doubt Sarah intended to raise herself with Abraham), chapter 16 says she was “dealt harshly with” by her jealous owner. Sarah abuses Hagar and is shown to look down on Hagar's son Ishmael in chapter 21, not wanting him to play with her own son, his half-brother. None of this presents a pleasant picture of Sarah, or Abraham for that matter. They have abused Hagar, and then they abandon her. In verse 11 Abraham is said to be distressed, not because of how Hagar is treated, but only because of his son. No one cares about Hagar.

Except God. When Hagar fears that she and her son Ishmael will die in the desert, God's angel speaks to her and God opens her eyes to a well, that they might drink and live. God cares what happens to Hagar. In chapter 16 she called God “the God who sees me”, as no one else saw her.

There is also a challenge here, as in Chapter 16 God tells Hagar to go back to Sarah and Abraham. This isn't a message we would give to a victim of slavery or abuse today. But it's the only time we see Hagar making a choice for herself, choosing to trust that God will remain with her even in the most difficult of situations. One of today's readings is Psalm 86. Though it says ‘of David’, Hagar could be reading these words. She was poor, and needy, and put her trust in God. Hagar was a means to an end to Sarah and Abraham, a way of having a child, not even a person in her own right. As much as we honour and learn from figures in the Bible they were still humans, subject to the sins of their cultures, times and personalities. But God valued Hagar enough to see her; to send an angel to her in her time of need – not once but twice.

Think about who else in the Bible meets with an angel. (*Note to preachers: You may wish to ask this question and encourage people to respond – give a chocolate to everyone who can remember a story.*) Most of the stories are connected to ‘heroes of the faith’ – Moses, Gideon, Paul, Peter. But angels also appeared to the shepherds when Jesus was born; to the mother of Samson; to Mary and Elizabeth – all people who were considered unimportant within their societies, just like Hagar.

Hagar was a slave, a victim of abuse, an Egyptian foreigner, a runaway, a woman – and she was given this gift of an angelic visitation; of knowing that God saw her. In Matthew 10 Jesus told his disciples “Do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”. The angel also told Hagar not to be afraid. Because she too, just like the disciples, is worth more than many sparrows.

You might know someone who feels like Hagar. Just as God saw Hagar, God sees them. God sees those trapped in slavery – fifty million children, women and men all over the world. Do you? Some of them are probably in your neighbourhood. God sees victims and survivors of abuse. Do you notice them? They are likely in your favourite coffee shop, or they may be sitting with you at church today. God sees those who have fled their homes, and those who face abuse because of their gender. Do you see them, as God sees them?

You might even feel like Hagar yourself - unloved, mistreated, like others have power over you, like no one notices you're there. But you are number one on God's call

sheet. God knows who you are, God knows what's going on in your life. God sees you. God knows you. God loves you. No strings attached.

Questions for discussion:

Who do you think is number one on the call sheet in this story? Why?

Who do you identify with in this story – Hagar, Sarah, or Abraham? Or Ishmael or Isaac? Why?

Imagine you are first on the call sheet. What tone do you think you set for those around you? Your family, friends, colleagues, neighbours?

How do you react to the idea that Sarah and Abraham may have been slave owners, and abused Hagar?

The attitudes and perspectives of people in the Bible is often not the same thing as the attitude and perspective of God. Where do you see God in this story? What's God's attitude?

Who are the outcasts in your society? Who are you jealous of? Whose children do you look down on? Do you need to ask forgiveness for any prejudices you may have, known or unknown?

What does it mean to 'see' someone today? What actions can we take to be a sign of God's love for them?

God loves you. No strings attached. How does this make you feel?⁴

Hymn:

489 STF – All I once held dear, built my life upon OR

250 STF – Jesus calls us! O'er the tumult

Prayers of intercession

[Psalm 86 is a prayer of faith, a prayer for help, and a prayer of worship. Pray it together, for yourselves and for your community. You might want to print a copy for everyone, or put it on the big screen.]

Pray for those who are fleeing persecution or domestic violence. God, we pray for all those in homes which are not places of peace but places of violence. Grant them safe refuges. We pray for peace in broken nations and broken homes. We ask protection for all those at risk of violence.

Pray for women and children trapped in the slave trade. God, you see those who are unseen; those who are trapped in horrific slavery. Bring freedom O God, bring healing, bring restoration to the full life you created them to have.

Ask forgiveness for your own prejudices. God, I ask forgiveness for all the times I have looked down on others. I ask forgiveness for all the times I have used power to get my own way, even at the cost of other people. I ask forgiveness for all the times that I have sinned against others; for all the times I have gossiped, spoken in anger, or uttered words of hate. I ask that you bless all those people I have spoken and acted against.

⁴ Reflection written by Abi Jarvis

Violence against women in the Bible: biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/shetoo (episode 2 is about Hagar)

Modern day slavery: modernslaveryhelpline.org (08000 121 700) run by Unseen

Domestic violence: nationaldahelpline.org.uk (0808 2000 247) run by Refuge

I ask healing for any hurt I have caused.

In a moment of silence, bring to mind all the people you know who feel unloved. Thank God for God's love for them.

Amen.⁵

We will now take up the offering.

We are your people Lord, accept again the offerings we make.
We are your disciples Lord, use us to build your Kingdom.
Bless these gifts, and may they become tools for your grace.
Amen.⁶

Hymn:

673 STF – Will you come and follow me if I but call your name? OR
503 STF – Love divine, all loves excelling

Blessing

We go out, with an open-hearted God at our side,
We leave here, with a loving God in our midst,
We face the week ahead, with the Spirit of God amongst us.

Amen.⁷

⁵ Prayers of intercession written by Abi Jarvis

⁶ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker