

SUNDAY AUGUST 23rd 2020

Leader: Delyth Mayhew

Preacher: Mark Reid

Words of Welcome

A few weeks ago, Mark, in his sermon, referred to the worship of idols rife in the time when Isaiah was written. It left me thinking about all the different idols people have these days, the things and people they worship – and about myself. Are there things that are **that** important to me, that maybe push God into second place?

Call to worship Habakkuk 2: 18 -20

This is what the prophet Habbakkuk writes

***Of what value is an idol, since man has carved it?
Or an image that teaches lies?
For he who makes it trusts in his own creation;
He makes idols that cannot speak.
Woe to him who says to wood "Come to life!"
Or to lifeless stone, "Wake up!"
Can it give guidance?
It is covered with gold and silver;
There is no breath in it.***

***But the Lord is in His holy temple:
Let all the earth be silent before Him"***

PRAYER

Let's have a moment of silence, and take the opportunity to give thanks to the one true God who is in His temple and who is over all, above all and in all – from whom all life flows and who is our God and our Father.

..AMEN

***God is in His temple, the Almighty Father,
Round His footstool let us gather.
Him with adoration serve,
The Lord most holy,
Who hath mercy on the lowly.
Let us raise hymns of praise,
For His great salvation,
God is in His temple!***

Song 1590 We see the Lord

Before that last song I read the first verse of 150 years old hymn. You may have recognised it. And I will be using the other verses in a short while. It is a hymn that reminds us that God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is the only true God.

He is the one we worship, the one who will have the final victory, because of who He is and what he has done, and continues to do for us. So let us sing our praise of Him –

SONG 675 Blessing and honour

Christ comes to His temple,

*We, his word receiving,
Are made happy in believing.
Lo! From sin delivered,
He hath turned our sadness,
Our deep gloom, to light and gladness!
Let us raise hymns of praise
For our bonds are severed:
Christ comes to His temple!*

Song 1702 - Amazing grace

God did not leave us to fight all our battles alone – He left His Holy Spirit to live within us and guide our way through life, if we only trust Him and lean on Him.

*Come and claim Thy temple,
Gracious Holy Spirit!
In our hearts Thy home inherit.
Make is us Thy dwelling,
Thy high work fulfilling,
Into ours Thy will instilling.
Till we raise hymns of praise,
Beyond mortal telling.
In the eternal temple.*

Song 1231 Father of life draw me closer

I'm sure you all remember the service we had in July led by staff of The Leprosy Mission.

Here is a brief update I received recently on the work at Chandkhuri Hospital in India.

Staff were turning patients away because they didn't have a sterile environment to perform operations and eye surgeries.

Thanks to the generous support of many, a new operating theatre will be built there.

Let's pray:

Father, we give thanks for the work of Leprosy Mission and for the difference it is making in so many lives. We pray now for the work at Chandkhuri Hospital. We pray for the staff there and all the patients who will be helped because of the generosity of so many. Father, be in that place, in the hands of doctors and nurses, and may your name be acknowledged in the hearts of all who feel your healing touch in their hands.

AMEN

Just as Leprosy Mission – and so many other groups and ministries –are doing all they can to help people –and especially in these difficult times, so we are called to do all we can to help those who suffer in any way, those who need love and support and to tell the good news of Christ's redeeming life and love.

And Why?

Because – as Peter says in the second chapter of his first letter -

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light"

We declare His praises and our gratitude as we sing

Song 1972 My heart is filled with thankfulness

Intercessory Prayers

NOTICES

As we commence our intercessory prayers this morning, we look forward to our next big change in five months; to return to Sunday worship in our church building, although not quite as we knew it. You will be receiving either an email or letter entitled Return to Church in the next couple of weeks. Please read it carefully as we need to do things in a certain way to comply with Government regulations and guidelines relating to making the church "Covid safe."

PIC OF CHURCH

In order to hold morning services, we need stewards to carry out some essential tasks. These are different from what stewards and welcomers have traditionally done. Each Sunday we need two stewards, one to welcome people, explain arrangements and take details for track and trace, and another to direct people to their seats. These are essential tasks, without which we can't open. If you are able to help, please let Corinne or Ian know as soon as possible.

HOPE

We are also looking for volunteers to tend the church garden as Linda and David have moved to Lowestoft. Please let one of the leaders know if you are able to help.

Let's bring this before the Lord:

Father, we come trusting You this morning as we seek to move on to the first stages re-opening the church. May You help us to understand and adapt to the measures taken to protect our health, and however different they are to what we are used to, may we see beyond them, that we may draw closer to You and worship You together.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

There have been some big issues in the past week and as we pray this morning I would like to focus on two of them now. Firstly we are going to pray for the massive pressure there now is on many families as a result of job losses resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

Secondly we are going to pray for young people whose immediate future has been thrown into turmoil because of the muddle over examination grades.

Let's pray.

Father, we continue to be concerned at the suffering caused as a result of Covid-19. We continue to pray for the families who have lost loved ones, those that are suffering ongoing health problems from the disease, and those who have suffered loss of jobs, as a result of the economic downturn with all the problems of debt, food poverty, stress, depression and homelessness that result from it. As your people, help us to bring help and hope to those we know in whatever way you enable us to do.

We also pray for those young people who have been upset and confused over the mess up with examination grades this week. We pray for those who lost university places because of it and we pray that they may find a solution that will help them move on constructively from this situation. We thank you for those students who were successful, particularly those known to us, that they may make wise decisions as to their future in the coming weeks and months. We pray for those going on to colleges and universities, that as they are faced with new ideas, that they may meet Christians from the local Christian Union or elsewhere, and that you may open their minds to spiritual things that lead to faith

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

VICTOR

Finally, I received an email this week encouraging us to pray for Pastor Victor and his wife Shamiram who were appealing long sentences for holding church services in their home. They were out on bail but had been told by the courts that Shamiram's appeal had failed and they must return to jail. Open Doors asked for prayer because of the injustice they are suffering. However, within 24 hours, it was reported that both of them had left Iran and hope to appeal their sentences from abroad. So we praise God for their safety but continue to pray for four other Christians who have been sentenced to prison for converting from Islam to Christianity. They are awaiting appeals to their sentences too.

Father, we thank you that Pastor Victor and his wife have now left Iran and are free. Thank you that they were able to do this, but we pray for the four others, who have been jailed simply for following Jesus. We pray that you will give them strength as they wait for their appeals to be heard and give them strength by Your Holy Spirit to continue as faithful witnesses to their living Lord Jesus.

We ask this in His name,
Amen.

Song: Come and praise Him, royal priesthood

A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

Priests. What image comes into your head when I say the word “priest”.

RC PRIEST

Maybe it’s one of these. An ordained priest in an Episcopalian church like the RCs or the Church of England. ORTHODOX churches have ordained priests too, but as we know, most Protestant free churches, including Baptists don’t – or do we?

We also know that in other religions, there are priests.

So to ask the basic question -- what is a priest? I did a dictionary hunt and here is a definition that I think covers all bases.

A priest is one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God or some other deity.

LEVITICAL PRIEST

When we come to the subject of priests in the Bible, I can imagine that most of us will think immediately of the Levitical priesthood – those from the tribe of Levi who had the role under the Old Covenant of being those who led the people in formal worship at the Temple, and presented their sacrifices before God; and there was of course, the High Priest, who made sacrifices of atonement on their behalf according to the terms of the covenant. Their authorization to do so came through their descent from Levi, particularly through Aaron’s branch. They were God-appointed under the terms of the covenant with Israel. And of course their whole role is specified in detail in the Torah, particularly Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Most importantly, the role of priest was to ensure that people connected with God, in the case of Levitical priests, through the temple rituals.

When we were looking at Isaiah a few weeks ago, I pointed out another concept of priesthood in the Old Testament that lies at the heart of God’s relationship with Israel and is also at the heart of the New Covenant through Jesus.

VERSE

Here it is again in Isaiah 61:6 *And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.* That wasn’t addressed to Levites, it was issued to the Jewish nation as a whole as they looked forward to a future beyond the Exile.

That Israel were as a nation priests of God wasn’t a new idea: it predates the giving of the 10 Commandments. We read this in Exodus 19:1-6 (NIV)

VERSES

On the first day of the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on that very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai. 2 After they set out from Rephidim, they entered the Desert of Sinai, and Israel camped there in the desert in front of the mountain.

3 Then Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain and said, “This is what you are to say to the descendants of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4 ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.”

God chose that nation with an intention, to be His treasured possession. To be to Him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Holy, set apart for Him; priests. Their role was mediatory – to bring God to the nations. That was their

purpose, their call. I commented frequently in our Isaiah series how the Jews were seen as supposed to be bringing the light of Yahweh to the Gentile Nations.

Oh, how they failed! How they looked inward instead of outward! How they disobeyed God. The covenant came with conditions. *VERSE 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.* The price of their disobedience was disaster after disaster. Being a special people brought with it responsibilities. And we know of their rise and fall.

SYNAGOGUE

But one thing that did come out of the Exile was that if they were a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, then they had access to God irrespective of the Levitical setup – and so in Exile they established centres for the reading of the scriptures and prayer – synagogues - which they continue to have today. Interestingly, as I understand it, Jewish people believe that worship can occur anywhere where ten assemble for that purpose. It doesn't replace the Temple but it freed Jewish people to live and work anywhere in the world.

Then Jesus came and through His death on the cross, He ushered in a New Covenant. Through Christ the intent of God to reach the nations and bring salvation to them is now being accomplished through God's people in Christ. And the words used to describe these people – us – are the same as He used for Israel in Exodus 19. Here's how Peter puts it and Delyth focussed on these words in the first part of the service today.

VERSES

4 As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him— 5 you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ

And then in verse 9

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

VERSE Here we see the same description as Exodus 19 but now it's used for the Church: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

That's why, free churches like Baptist Churches don't have a formal priesthood – we are all priests anyway. That's why even though various types of leadership are established in the NT (because we still need leadership), none are described in any way as priests, the only priesthoods mentioned of relevance to Christians are the Priesthood of all Believers and the Order of Melchizedek, which I shall mention in our Communion Service in a couple of weeks.

So, I am a priest of the most high God and so are you if you know and love Jesus. With priesthood come privileges and responsibilities which we should find both a challenge and encouragement. Here are four.

1. We have direct access to God
2. We participate in sacrificial worship
3. We are representatives of God
4. We are agents of reconciliation

1. We have direct access to God.

It's incredible! Each of us who trust and follow Christ have direct access to God, anytime, anywhere. Oh how lightly we take this privilege! As it says in Hebrews, we have boldness to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus. What to do? Our role as priests isn't just to pray for ourselves and enjoy the presence of God. As with the OT priests, we pray in order that others are blessed by the presence of God and that their needs are met in Him. We pray with others and for others; to bring their needs before God. It's what we do with prayer. Sad to say, so many Christians have difficulty praying for themselves let alone the needs of others. Yet priesthood is an outward looking role. We pray for others who can't (or won't) pray for themselves, and for situations around us and in the world and for what God desires us to pray into. Prayer is key to the priestly role. How much do we pray for others?

2. We participate in sacrificial worship

Priests participate in worship and encourage others to worship. That's what the priests did as they presented sacrifices at the Temple. Worship isn't merely something we indulge in personally, it's something that's shared. One thing that lockdown has exposed is how poor a view of worship many have. There is a danger of equating worship with praise, particularly music. Many Christians are dismayed that they are now unable to sing at church. "We can't worship" some say.

Quite the reverse. We are being given an unprecedented opportunity for God to teach us that worship isn't having a sing song on a Sunday morning, but an expression of His worthiness, His worth to us – worth-ship. There are so many ways we can do that – in words of praise, prayers of thanks, in art, in poetry, in meditating on music rather than singing, in silence, in the reading and meditation of God's Word. How do you think persecuted Christians like Pastor Victor managed? We need to understand the breath and depth of God and what He has done for us in Christ and losing singing allow us to explore the many other facets of worship and bring them to one another in order to honour Him.

There is another aspect of this though. How do we express God's worth most in our lives: by our songs, by our words, by our artistic skill. No. No. By following Him in obedience. In the OT priests made sacrifices for the benefit of others. As priests of the most High God we are called to sacrifice too: here's the command -- VERSE Romans 12:1 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.* Under the New Covenant, God only requires one sacrifice of His priests – themselves, not dead but alive – set apart, holy. What for? The same as Jesus, to obey Him, love others, to serve others, pray for others, bring Good news to others. This is what worship is all about. We find these words echoed in the reading from 1 Peter 2:9.

That's why talking of worship as just singing praises is wrong. It's selling God short. He doesn't want our songs, however good or bad. He wants *us*, lock stock and barrel. When he has, anything else we call worship becomes truly meaningful.

3. We are representatives of God

Levitical priests were there as representatives of God. To speak and act on His word as taught in the Scriptures. We as His present crop of priests also represent Him. There are many other terms in the NT that underline this: we are children of God, citizens of heaven, part of a holy nation, ambassadors of Christ. How many times have I preached on the notion that we are the hands and feet of Christ? Ultimately, we are the most significant evidence that Jesus exists. We are priests. It's supposed to be like that. When people see us, do they see Jesus? If not, ask the Holy Spirit to mould you into the priest, the person you should be; the person you are called as a priest to be.

4. We are agents of reconciliation

As priests, our main role is to bring people to God - that is what Jesus has called to you to do. We have not as priests been called to indulge ourselves with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs – we use our gifts, our abilities, our priestly appointment to do the work of the church which is to bring others to Christ – to be agents of their reconciliation with God. Priests never existed to indulge themselves in the blessed things of God in the Temple. Their role was to bring others to God. Another thing lockdown has bought us is the opportunity to serve others in new ways, and the realisation that we spent so much time servicing activities in the building that took us away from bringing the presence of Jesus to others. As we come out of this pandemic (eventually), let's ask God that we may use our resources creatively that they may become our servants rather than our focus, that we may be able to use our gifts effectively in our ministry of reconciliation, bringing others to Christ.

Let's pray:

Father, thank you for the privilege that you have given us of being your priests, being your holy nation. Thank you that we are able to do what millions can't – to come into your presence boldly and joyfully because of the blood of Jesus. Help us by your Spirit, to use the privilege you have given us to intercede affectively for others. Give us that burden for others that we will represent you faithfully, that they will see Jesus in us. Forgive us Father that so often we have had a one-dimensional view of worship. Help us in the coming months to present our bodies to you as a living sacrifice, that we may worship you with our obedience. May we as individuals and together as a church have a

new impetus and empowerment by your Spirit to serve you as priests in the ministry of reconciliation we have to the local community around us.

We ask this in Jesus' name

Amen.

Here is the risen Son

"We are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light"

"To the One seated on the throne and to the Lamb

Be blessing and honour and glory and might

Forever and ever!" AMEN

I pray that this coming week will be a good one for you all – that you will keep well and strong and know God's presence with you each day, blessing you with all good things.

FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

Read 1 Peter 2:1-10

1. The Old Covenant had a Temple, priests and sacrifices. The New Covenant also has all three, but how do they differ from what the Jews had? Try to think why?
2. The benefit of being a priest was access to God. We have that kind of access as priests and Mark talked about interceding for others as being part of our priestly role? How difficult do we find that? What sorts of things have encouraged us to pray for others?
3. "That's why talking of worship as just singing praises is wrong. It's selling God short. He doesn't want our songs, however good or bad. He wants **us**, lock stock and barrel. When he has, anything else we call worship becomes truly meaningful." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
4. "Ultimately, we are the most significant evidence that Jesus exists. We are priests. It's supposed to be like that." Has the lockdown helped you think about how you are the hands and feet of Jesus to others? How may it help us as we think of re-opening ministries in the church in the coming months?