

Order of Service

18th July 2021

Hi and welcome to this morning's service, our last to be broadcast on YouTube. We're returning to live services at Maidstone Road next week – more on that later.

So, how are you feeling today? You may be sad because of all that has come to pass over the past year, or rejoicing that life seems to be returning to normal with lockdown ending – or is it? Today I'm going to look back some of the songs that were new to me and/or new to the church over the last 17 months of broadcast services. In this first song, Ron Kenoly reminds us that we have a God who in Christ, is able to change our mourning into dancing. The song was written by Tommy Walker – more on him later – and is based on Psalm 30.

Song: Mourning into dancing

Psalm 30:4-12

4 Sing to the LORD, all you godly ones!
Praise his holy name.

5 For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favour lasts a lifetime!

Weeping may last through the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

6 When I was prosperous, I said,
"Nothing can stop me now!"

7 Your favour, O LORD, made me as secure as a mountain.
Then you turned away from me, and I was shattered.

8 I cried out to you, O LORD.
I begged the Lord for mercy, saying,

9 "What will you gain if I die,
if I sink into the grave?

Can my dust praise you?
Can it tell of your faithfulness?

10 Hear me, LORD, and have mercy on me.
Help me, O LORD."

11 You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.

You have taken away my clothes of mourning and clothed me with joy,
12 that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!

Please join us in this response

Now is the moment of grace. This is the hour of blessing.

Today is the day of salvation. Here is the path to new life.

Already joy is abounding, and love is flowing.

For this is the day God is making. Let us rejoice and sing.

We rejoice because through faith, God has rescued us from sin and death by the death of Jesus on the cross. This next song by Graham Kendrick is one that I'd not heard before this year, even though it's quite an old one, and it reminds us that our hope and our joy is because of what God has done for us in Jesus.

Song: The crucified Man

We know that even though Jesus died, He is now risen and glorified. One feature of lockdown was how people used video to create lockdown choirs – individuals singing and playing instruments at home being blended together using the power of technology, and nifty editing, to produce choral pieces. This was MRBC's contribution, reminding us of the risen Christ.

Song: See what a morning

I was reading an article by Open Doors this week entitled Struck Down Not Once But Twice. It was about Christians in India who like others in that land have been adversely affected by the Covid pandemic. We have prayed several times for India recently and maybe you have donated to one of the campaigns to bring medical aid and fund vaccine distribution. However, Covid-19 continues to have a devastating impact, and Christians are often the most vulnerable to losing the income they need to survive. Believers also face violence, discrimination and rejection – fuelled by anti-Christian propaganda. They are being hit twice: by the pandemic, but also by finding themselves low down in the social pile due to discrimination and persecution.

Here's one person's experience of that persecution – Vinita's Story. VIDEO

Christians find themselves marked men and women, simply because of their faith in Christ. They are the target of persecution where far right Hindus are in power, such as in Uttar Pradesh State. A recent report by Open Doors on persecution in Uttar Pradesh found thoroughly evidenced experiences of exclusion, discrimination, harassment, bullying, intimidation, violence and injustice. The discrimination and violence was targeted at those who wore small but overt symbols of their faith, carried Bibles, were attempting to meet in order to pray or to come together to celebrate faith-based and/or even secular events.

Their report makes disturbing reading and you can find a copy on their website – link below if you are viewing this on our web page.

We can act, through helping financially, and by lobbying our MPs and they tell us how we can do it on their website. But there is much we can do that's more significant: to bring it before our heavenly Father. There are prayer resources on the Open Doors website too and I am going to lead us in prayer now.

Father

We thank you for the work of Open Doors as it brings our attention to many of the outrages perpetrated towards Christians world wide. We lift the country of India before you today and particularly those Christians like Vinita who have been the victims of violent persecution. Healing God bring to these Christians healing from their injury and trauma.

We pray that you will keep Your church in India safe in these troubled times and that rather than just surviving these two crises it may become stronger because of them. May they, by their

attitudes and actions show what you are like, that You may speak through their lives to those that don't know Jesus.

We also pray that Open Doors partners in India will be able to reach those most in need of support at the present time.

We ask this in Jesus' name

Amen.

Let's recognise that Jesus brings light into our dark world. This song is quite old now, but I only heard it for the first time last Advent (it's an advent hymn) yet it is an invitation to Jesus to enter afresh into our lives and into this dark world.

Song: Into the darkness

Prayers for the church

Next week we return to the church for face to face services, seven months since our last and I've some good news for you, after a surveyor's visit this last week we are going to be able to restart services in the main church. Part of it will be roped off for safety reasons, but the ceiling is otherwise safe and we can hold services as normal.

Well, I say as normal because we still need to be mindful of the covid pandemic. The Government are leaving it to our own discretion what measures we will continue to have in place to protect ourselves from Covid. So next week be prepared for the following. I've put these in the Weekly Sheet too, so do take a look.

SANITISE HANDS

We ask you to use hand sanitiser as you enter the building.

USE A MASK

We ask you to use a mask indoors particularly when circulating, but feel free to take it off when sitting down. We are allowed to sing.

MAKE SPACE

Our seating is still spaced out in the church. Please be mindful of giving others space when seated or standing, particularly in areas that are crowded after the service.

MAKE THE MOST OF FRESH AIR

All the windows will be open to gain maximum ventilation, so bring a jumper if it's a bit chilly. Feel free to take your refreshments and conversation outside after the service.

Even though there is no legal requirement to do any of this, we are reminded in God's word to value others above ourselves, not looking to our own interests, but each of us to the interests of the others. Also to remember that even though something may be lawful, it is not necessarily expedient to do it if we are looking out for others. Let's do everything to the glory of God.

Let's pray for the church as we make this transition closer to normality

Father, thank you that we have an opportunity to return to the church building to worship face to face again. As we do, we pray that the works needed to repair the building will be expedited as soon as possible, but in the meanwhile you would help those organising our return to the building

to get the place set up in a way that keeps us safe in every respect, as well as makes us comfortable and welcoming.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

Prayer for individuals.

As we have done for some weeks now we spend time in prayer individually for those we know who need to know God's love, peace and healing in their lives.

QUIET MUSIC

We bring all these people before You in Jesus' name

Amen

We were fortunate to have permission to use video songs by US worship leader, composer and singer Tommy Walker the past few months, which helped save a lot of work with video production. This song was one I played at home rather a lot over the past months as it reminds us of the uniqueness and wonder of our God - There is no-one like you.

Song: There is no-one like You

Reading Genesis 17

THE MARK OF THE COVENANT

GOOGLE PIN

If you've ever used Google Maps you'll be familiar with this symbol: it's a Google Pin and it marks a particular place on a map such as on this MAP OF WALTON. Needless to say because it uses postcode data, a number of these pins are inaccurate including the exact location of the church building!

What really makes the church pin stand out is the cross on it to show us what it is. It begs a question. What is it about us that marks us out as God's people? ZOOM OUT.

In every part of life we use symbols to mark out what something does, or who someone is. For example we saw plenty of these last week. It identified whoever displayed it as a supporter of the England football team. Flags sometimes do more than just mark out who or where someone is; take a look at this EU FLAG for example. It identifies who uses it as being part of an organisation formed by treaty – it is a mark of the various Treaties that brought the EU into being.

Treaties or Covenants are often celebrated by flags or symbols. Marriage is a covenant and a symbol of that covenant involves the giving and receiving of RINGS. It shows that the couple have been joined in marriage – the wearing of the rings marks them out to others as married as does a change of title and surname for the woman.

TITLE

Abram was the recipient of God's promises which God was slowly revealing to him, as he had the capacity to embrace and understand. The promise made was two-fold, that Abram would become a great nation, and that the nation would occupy the land of Canaan.

We saw from Genesis 15 how at last Abram started to believe God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6) and at the end of chapter 15 we read in some detail what the early

history of nationhood would involve. Through it Abram was beginning to understand that he would be the biological father of a great nation.

Of course, Abram and Sarai second-guessed God and Abram took Hagar as his wife and from their union came Ishmael which wasn't what God intended – and everything went quiet for 13 years, until just about when Ishmael would be reaching the age of adulthood in that culture, and it would be assumed that he would become Abram's official heir.

God breaks His silence and made a formal covenant with Abram. Up to this point there were promises but now Abram was being asked to effectively seal that covenant by responding to God's offer. And this covenant was going to have a sign that marked who the children of Abraham were and that was circumcision. It was a common way in pre-industrial societies of showing allegiance and in this case it was going to seal the covenant between God and Abram.

And it still does for Jewish people today. It's believed that 1 in 3 males globally, are circumcised, the majority being Muslim: with the practice inspired by the covenant with Abram which included Ishmael. A significant number are circumcised for other reasons, mostly cultural or medical.

To accept God's promises of a nation and a land, Abram had to undergo what was then for an older man, a painful surgical operation, and then he had to persuade all the other men in his household to be circumcised, together with their sons, including his own son, Ishmael. It was a pretty big and drastic step for Abram and his entourage and it showed how far Abram and his family had come in the years since leaving Harran in terms of their willingness to trust God.

Abram's journey also challenges us. How much do we trust God? How far are we prepared to go to follow Jesus?

Even then, Abram still had the capacity to be surprised even shocked by what God next said - that the covenant would be fulfilled through a son born to Sarai. And Abram's reaction to that was? *Abraham fell face down; he laughed and said to himself, 'Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?'*

Abram laughed at God! What a crazy prophecy! God's promises about being father of a great nation that would occupy Canaan were to be achieved by a son born of 90 year old woman and a centenarian man. Ridiculous! He laughed at God. He was incredulous at the idea! But he went along with this and as we shall find out in the next chapter – he didn't tell Sarai about the prophecy yet.

One thing we need to embrace in our prayer lives again, particularly after the disappointments of the last 18 months is to regain our incredulity with what can and does do. He is the God of the impossible and we need to start to embrace that again as we ask God "what next?" We need a faith lift. We need to trust God afresh.

The covenant brought two things to Abram (and Sarai)

1. A change of name.

Abram was to change his name to Abraham. It involves a two letter change in English – only one in Hebrew – and it reflects the change that Abraham's faith had brought to him

Abram = high father - the Big Boss changed to;
Abraham = father of a multitude.

In his family and household, Abram was the Big Boss. He had authority over all his servants and over a bevy of sheep, goats, camels, cattle or whatever. It was all his. Products of his graft, influence and business acumen.

Now the man with only one son, was to become the father of a multitude – by faith that’s what he was now called. And how was he going to get there, not be Ishmael but by a son yet to be born to 100 and 90 year old parents. What faith! Or to everyone else perhaps what a laugh – Isaac actually means “he laughs.” But the joke was on Abraham and on them.

Sarai’s name change was more significant.

Sarai = a head person, a dominant wife – someone who got her own way and that changed to Sarah = a person of high nobility – someone who deserves the utmost respect.

Sarai was mistress of all she surveyed. Her name suggests a bossy wife who always got her own way. If you remember, she mistreated Hagar. I wonder how well-liked she was? God was going to a great work in her life. If any woman produces a child miraculously at 90 years of age you can bet she would be a woman who deserves utmost respect!

Whatever, the name changes showed that the respect they were to be shown was because something God had wrought in them. They had no capacity to do it themselves. In the covenant, their name changes represented their submission to His ways.

When we trusted Jesus for the first time, we became part of a new family. We owned a new name – the name of Jesus, we became Christians. As we said earlier – we put our faith in the Crucified Man. We had conferred on us as part of our covenant with God in Christ, membership of His family. God is our Father. We are sons and daughters of the living God? Really? Yes!

It doesn’t cost much to be a Christian here but in parts of India it’s costing lives livelihoods and people’s freedom as we heard earlier. It’s difficult to show the love of Christ in those situations.

How proud are we of the God we serve the Jesus we follow and the Holy Spirit who lives in us? What does it really mean to be known as a Christian? It should be a name that moves others, a name that we own with pride, a mark of the covenant God has made with us in Christ.

In a moment, we’ll pray that God will use us to make a difference to the lives of others because of the name we own.

2. An outward sign

The covenant with Abraham had an important outward sign: circumcision. That symbol has remained a mark of that covenant for Jewish people to this day. It defines who they are. No true Jew is uncircumcised. One debate amongst Jews down the ages is how much Jewishness circumcision confers on someone. Some said that just being circumcised made someone right with God. However, as we delve into the OT we find a line of thought that circumcision was only the outward mark of someone who was inwardly dedicated to God. They used the word circumcised to describe godly actions. So Exodus 6:12 talks of uncircumcised lips, other places talk of hearts that

were circumcised or uncircumcised (Leviticus 26:41; Ezekiel 44:7, 9; Deut. 30:6), in Jeremiah 6:10 we hear described the uncircumcised ear. To them being circumcised did not mean having a certain operation carried out on a man's flesh but having a change take place in his life.

Now we know Muslims practice circumcision too, all coming from the Arab link to Ishmael. So why don't Christians practice circumcision? We belong to a different covenant but there's still circumcision, it's just that it's different. Here's Paul writing in Colossians 2:9-15

9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Christians are a circumcised people, but it's based on attitudes to circumcision in the OT that emphasised changed lives. So for us the surgery of circumcision was made as Paul puts it "without hands" in our innermost spiritual being. When we trusted Christ, God cut off and did away with our sinful flesh. It's dead; nailed to the cross. We are now raised again to new life without the burden of our sin. The evidence of our circumcision is, or should be, our risen life in Christ.

The covenant with Abraham was sealed with a physical sign, and it was hoped that the people with that sign would reflect the God of promise that it represented – that didn't always work out, from Abraham's day to this.

It works the other way for us as people of the New Covenant. You'll notice than in verse 12 that Paul uses the same baptismal picture terminology that he uses in Romans 6 to describe the process of conversion. Our outward physical sign of what has occurred inwardly is baptism. That's why it is important to be baptised, because it illustrates the covenant that God has made with us in Christ.

PEOPLE OF PROMISE

Where do we finish with this today? Like Abraham we are people of promise – and we have far more promises attached to us than Abraham ever did. In Christ we are a changed people, new creations, people with hope and a purpose; forgiven people children of the living God.

Where is that going to take us in the next year/18 months? Are we going to look to a God who does mighty things? A God who defeated kings and give a son to a very old lady? I want to encourage us all in this time we are seeking to return to Maidstone Road to think God sized things, rather than see the problems, because when we do that we become people of large visions. May that be so .

Let's pray

At this time when there are so many challenges, pressures and uncertainty, help us to remember the covenant You made with us in Christ – a covenant of forgiveness, a covenant that has made us part of Your family, given us a new name; the name of Jesus, a new way of describing us; Christians; a purpose and a hope. May our lives show clearly who we belong to. Like Abraham may we see beyond where we are right now and see what things could and should be in Christ. Give vision and a faith and trust to match, that we will see You working in people's lives in new ways. We ask this in Jesus' name
Amen.

One song I have had in my repertoire for a while which I never got around to showing was one that's relevant as we talk of the God of Abraham – a God who is mighty. It's simply called *Mighty is our God*.

Song: Mighty is our God

Let's close with a familiar benediction

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Before I sign out, there is one last song I want to play in full. You will be familiar with the music running in the background. I've used it as opening and closing music for months. It's another Advent and Christmas song (great song for July!) I took a liking to over the year but never found printed words until recently. It's a "Marmite" song. You'll love it or hate it. Apart from some sleigh bells at the start, it doesn't sound like a Christmas song. It's written by an Indian Christian Saroop Oomen, yet it doesn't sound Indian with the exception of some Hindi in the middle. Yet it encourages us to shout and proclaim the greatness of God who is among us. So that's it. Enjoy. Be blessed. Stay safe. See you next week at Maidstone Road. Goodbye.

Song: Shout

For Reflection and Discussion

Read Genesis 17

1. In what ways do Christians show that they follow Jesus? What sorts of thing do you think tends to put people off Christians? What do you think impresses them? Try to think of examples of each from your experience.
2. Abram and Sarai got new names when they trusted God and those names reflected that trust. What changes to our status occurred when we trusted Christ? How do you think that this should be reflected in our lives?

Read Colossians 2:9-15

3. From this passage, what is "*a circumcision not performed by human hands.*" When does it happen to those who follow the New Covenant? What does it involve? Why is baptism such an important outward sign of it? What else should show that circumcision not performed by human hands?