

Order of Service for 2nd August 2020

Identity Crisis

Call to Worship

Crowds followed Jesus into the wilderness and Jesus had compassion on them and taught them and, at the end of the day, they were hungry. Like a new Moses in the wilderness, Jesus shared out five loaves and two fish and fed many thousands of people. We come to him now, looking for him to feed us, and we come sharing perhaps a loaf or perhaps a fish, so that we in turn might feed the world in his name.

Let us sing that favourite of songs, Be still, opening our hearts to our wonder-working God.

Song (BPW 5) **Be Still, for the Presence of the Lord**

Verse 1

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One, is here.
Come bow before Him now
With reverence and fear.
In Him no sin is found;
We stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
The Holy One, is here.

Verse 2

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire,
With splendour He is crowned.
How awesome is the sight;
Our radiant King of light.
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

Verse 3

Be still, for the power of the Lord

Is moving in this place.

He comes to cleanse and heal,

To minister His grace.

No work too hard for Him,

In faith receive from Him.

Be still, for the power of the Lord

Is moving in this place.

Prayers

Praise Confession & the Lord's Prayer

St Francis of Assisi prayed, Who are you and who am I? We sit in the presence of God and ask the same questions. Who are you God? With what words may we name or describe you? Almighty King; tender lover, friend of the friendless, faithful one, holy one, the great I AM, Jesus... We adore you.

And who am I Lord? Who am I to sit in your sacred presence? And yet you welcome me home and give me a white stone on which is written a new name.

Forgive me my sins.

Who am I as I look at you? Yet you meet my gaze with eyes aflame with holy love.

Who are you and who am I? I adore you. I praise you. I come to serve you.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,

hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

And now we declare our faith in the song, Men of faith rise up and sing...

Song (WT 292) **Men of Faith**

Verse 1

Men of faith rise up and sing
Of the great and glorious King.
You are strong when you feel weak,
In your brokenness complete.

Chorus

*Shout to the north and the south,
Sing to the east and the west,
Jesus is Saviour to all,
Lord of heaven and earth.*

Verse 2

Rise up women of the truth,
Stand and sing to broken hearts,
Who can know the healing pow'r
Of our awesome King of love.

Chorus

We've been through fire,
We've been through rain,
We've been refined
By the pow'r of His name.
We've fallen deeper
In love with You,
You've burned
The truth on our lips.

Chorus

Verse 3

Rise up church with broken wings
Fill this place with songs again

Of our God who reigns on high;
By His grace again we'll fly.

Chorus x 2

Lord of heaven and earth
Lord of heaven and earth

Feature:

Today we hear again from Sarah Lewis as she emerges from behind closed doors...

I am coming out from behind closed doors!

Firstly, a big thanks to David for allowing me to update my previous contribution to this slot. Secondly, I've divided this article into three sections; shielding – facts and fiction, the challenges we face over the next week or so, and finally, what I want from you!

Shielding is the term used to cover those of us who are clinically extremely vulnerable to COVID-19. This is usually because of an issue with our immune system or a pre-existing lung condition. Myth one – it does not automatically apply to people over 70; they are classed as vulnerable and indeed I have heard of several toddlers who are shielding. Myth two – it is not a choice. For sure, it is not prescribed in law but is strict doctor's orders, not advice or an option, therefore.

Initially we were told we must remain in our home for at least 12 weeks with no contact other than with people we live with, although they must either shield or the person shielding must self-isolate. After 10 weeks we were allowed a daily walk and from July 4th, we could meet one person outdoors. Now, me being me, after five weeks and knowing that I was struggling, I looked into the facts; research, likely effects of no outdoor exercise, and I began going for the occasional walk at 6 am – usually on a Sunday when it was very quiet. My first Sunday, very scared but determined, I walked to church; well not actually to church but the equivalent distance in 100 metre strips of the pavement outside my house. The second Sunday, I did venture to the common and looked over to Church.

Since we have been allowed out, I have worked on building up my distance but it was hard at first but me and my face mask are now up to 4 km. Thank heavens for Joe Wicks and my wonderful gym instructor, Fran, with her combat classes for keeping my basic fitness level up.

Now from August 1st, next week as I speak, but yesterday as you listen, shielding is being paused and we are, in theory at least, able to behave or miss behave as people who haven't been shielding. Now what I haven't explained is that during the initial weeks we were receiving letters from the government and the NHS telling us how vulnerable we were, and daily texts during the first week telling us the safest place was our homes and that we could stand by an open window, feel the breeze and enjoy the view. Until this was clarified and expanded, many of us became frightened to even go into our garden. I remember being in near tears with the challenge of going out to put some rubbish in my bin. So this week you have people basically unfit, not used to mixing and who have been fed quite dark messages, going out on the streets.

And another thing, the streets we face – certainly the shops – are not the same as the ones we last visited in March. I last went to my local Co-op on March 17th and remember people fighting over the last loo roll and bottle of disinfectant. It was crowded and people were jostling. What's this I hear about limiting the number of people going in? One-way systems? Screens around the cashiers? What do I do? I don't want to get it wrong and get shouted at.

So that is where I come to you. I would like you firstly to remember us in your prayers and pray that we may find inner strength to tackle this new world. I know many of my friends are terrified at the prospect. I am determined but very scared myself. I want you to have patience if you see people getting it wrong, answer any silly questions people may have and be willing to take that extra step and to show people who explain they have been shielding, what to do. If you have contacts who work in shops, please let them know about our situation and ask them also to be patient.

I love living on my own but even I've had enough of a good thing!

Thanks for your thoughts Sarah. To follow God, as we learned last week, is a demanding thing, costing us everything.

Let's explore the nature of the Kingdom of God in our next hymn.

Hymn (BPW 321) **The Kingdom of God is Justice and Joy**

The Kingdom of God
Is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores
What sin would destroy;
God's power and glory
In Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter
That kingdom shall grow.

2. The kingdom of God
Is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed,
The sinners find place,
The outcasts are welcomed
God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened
In place of despair.

3. The kingdom of God
Is challenge and choice,
Believe the good news,
Repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
Brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement
For gain or for loss.

4. God's kingdom is come,
The gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun,
In heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom
Shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory
To God all in all!

Prayers of intercession

And today Cynthia leads our prayers.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Another week has passed, where our country and many other parts of your world are battling with this dreadful virus. The news media is full of bad or violent news, things that make us all appalled, sad, angry and scared. But there is so much more good and uplifting news. Kindness, care, concern for neighbours and friends. Kindness which has stretched to the stranger, who then may become less of a stranger, and for all of those things, we thank you Lord.

In some respects Father, the gradual lifting of lockdown has for some been even more difficult. We especially think of those who have been shielding for the past 18 weeks, advised that the only safe place is at home, now able to venture out into a very different environment which the majority of us have now become used to, and many are terrified. Bless them Father and give them confidence and a greater calm.

Father we are unable to put our arms around friends or family who may be in need of comfort. Help us all to be aware and feel your arms around us, giving us strength and hope in the knowledge that you are with us whatever our situation may be.

We continue to give thanks for hospital staff many of whom will have experienced very harrowing events in their daily work. We pray for their physical and mental health, as the pressures begin to ease. We have so many things and so much to be thankful for. We have not run out of food, our post has been delivered, bins emptied, deliveries made and ambulance and police on call and we see your glory all around

us, beauty in colour, sound, smell and touch. Thank you for the joy of speaking to each other and as lockdown eases, the joy of seeing each other.

Please be with those of our Church Family who are struggling or ill. We bring to you Val, Chris Adamson, Mark, John, and babies Jamie and Dylan. Father there will be others who we are not aware of, but will be known to you and we ask your healing hand be on all in special need.

Father help us to look forward with hope and the sure knowledge that you walk the road with us all.

Amen

Thanks Cynthia for those inspiring prayers.

Offering

All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above!

So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love!

And we thank you, O Lord from the bottom of our hearts as we reflect on presenting our gifts to you. Amen.

Readings

Our readings today are from Genesis and Romans.

Genesis 32: 22 – 31

Jacob wrestles with God

²² That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. ²³ After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. ²⁴ So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. ²⁵ When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. ²⁶ Then the man said, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.'

But Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'

²⁷ The man asked him, 'What is your name?'

'Jacob,' he answered.

²⁸ Then the man said, 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

²⁹ Jacob said, 'Please tell me your name.'

But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' Then he blessed him there.

³⁰ So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, 'It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared.'

³¹ The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip.

Romans 9: 1 - 5 Paul's anguish over Israel

9 I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit – ² I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption to sonship and daughterhood; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ⁵ Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen.

Who are you and who am I Lord? Well, we hope to reflect God's goodness and kindness in our lives as we sing the lovely hymn of God's magnanimous love, there's a wideness in God's mercy....

Hymn (BPW 573) There's **a Wideness in God's Mercy**

There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.

2. There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.

3. For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of our mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.

4. But we make His love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify His strictness
With a zeal He will not own.

5. There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.

6. If our love were but more simple,
We should take Him at His word;
And our lives be filled with gladness,
From the presence of the Lord.

O Lord, I offer to you now my prayer and preparation and ask that you speak whatever word is right for each of us as we listen now. Amen.

Sermon

Identity Crisis

So what church do you go to? Hearsall Baptist Church.

But what does that name mean? To be honest, nowadays at least, **Hearsall** doesn't have a great geographical resonance. Where does Hearsall begin and end? If I said I was having coffee in Earlsdon, you'd know what I meant. But what if I said I was having coffee in Hearsall?

Baptist - well for those of us who have been in Baptist churches for a while, this word carries huge meaning. We associate it with believers' baptism, with freedom of

conscience, and with the gathered church community. But for some in our church, and for nearly everyone outside it, the word has little or no meaning.

And what about **church**? If we know our New Testament, we are aware that *church* always refers to a community. But for most people today, the English word church refers to a building.

So, how might Hearsall Baptist Church translate in the ears of a young person who knew little or nothing of Christianity? Maybe something like this: a building somewhere near Hearsall Common in Coventry where I suppose a particular bunch of Christians go on a Sunday.

Does the name matter? Is it just a convenient handle? Or does the phrase *Hearsall Baptist Church* convey something important to us? Would it be possible for the name to change? Could God change our very identity?

We're told that Jacob means trickster, literally, *he grasps the heel*, a Hebrew idiom for *he deceives*. Jacob tricked twin brother Esau out of his birthright and tricked their father into giving him the blessing of the firstborn.

Decades later Jacob tricked his father-in-law, Laban, of the best animals in the flock, and deceived him by fleeing away with all he had, crossing the Euphrates River and heading for his father Isaac in the land of Canaan. God intervenes in a dream to rescue him from the wrath of the pursuing Laban.

So Jacob goes on his way, and angels meet him in a place he names Mahanaim, or Watchtower. Having made peace with Laban, he now must make peace with his twin-brother Esau. There's been a falsehood at the heart of his life, and now he must meet the brother he had wronged. He must face his past.

He sends messages to Esau, suing for peace. But in response, Esau amasses four hundred men to meet him. Now Jacob divides his wealth into two groups, so that all his eggs are not in the same basket. He sends three sets of extravagant gifts ahead to appease his brother, then, after everyone else has crossed the Jordan, he remains, and has a nocturnal wrestling match with a stranger at the ford of Jabbok.

They must have been evenly matched, Jacob and this stranger, because the fight lasts all night. But the stranger seems to have some magical power, for, when he touches the socket of Jacob's hip, that hip was wrenched. But Jacob clings on to his adversary, who says, 'Let me go, for it is daybreak.'

But Jacob will not release him without a price. 'I will not let you go until you bless me.'

Questions of identity now come up. 'What is your name?' asks the stranger? When Jacob gives his name, it is immediately changed. 'Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.'

Jacob asks the stranger for **his** name, but he will not give it. He wants to keep it secret, he won't reveal it, and perhaps that's why he wants to flee before darkness ends and his identity is revealed. 'Why do you ask my name?' But the stranger does bless Jacob.

So who is this stranger? The narrator does not quite explicitly tell us. A man? Jacob's alter ego? An angel? God?

At the end of the encounter, Jacob calls the place Peniel, meaning face of God, because he saw the face of God and lived. So Jacob believes he wrestled with God himself.

A later Israelite, Moses, is told that the name of God is *I AM*. Jacob gets his blessing, but he does not know the full identity of his God.

Anyway for Jacob, what's changed? He has struggled with himself, with God, with others, and he has a new name, probably meaning *He struggles with God*. He has been transformed from trickster to struggler. He was an individual, but now he is the father of a nation.

And so we learn today that struggling with faith is no bad thing. To struggle with faith is to take it seriously; is to learn and to grow and to go deeper with our God. Earlier

on in our Christian lives we may think that we simply believe and that's the end of it. But **what** do we believe? If we look at the Bible, it's not always clear exactly what we should believe.

Do we believe, as it says in the Bible, that women should cover their heads in worship? That evildoers should not be resisted, but that we should turn the other cheek, as Matthew says that Jesus taught? That physical discipline is essential to child-rearing as some biblical proverbs might say? That bad people will be thrown into an everlasting fire, as some of Jesus' parables seem to teach? That divorce is always wrong, as most, but not all New Testament passages state? That God told the Israelites to destroy whole people groups? That slaves should not generally be freed, but merely treated kindly? That women should be subject to men? Or that some women could be apostles - take your pick here folks.

No, we wrestle with all these topics and many more if we are honest Christians. Sometimes we wrestle with God, trying to work out who is this God we seek to follow. Sometimes with the Bible as we've seen in these texts I've mentioned, and in many other texts. Sometimes with ourselves, with our alter-ego, with our past. Sometimes with other Christians who see faith differently. You send people like me away to Bible college to make me a kind of umpire as you do the wrestling with the faith, and especially the wrestling with the Bible. It's good to wrestle!

Umpires have rules to follow. Uninformed readers of the Bible may think they are simply reading and applying the text. As I hope my examples a moment ago make clear, we do not often do that. We **interpret** the sacred text. And part of my job is to make explicit the rules by which we wrestle with the text of the Bible.

Here are seven of my own guidelines for wrestling with the scripture to bring a good interpretation:

1 Ethical

A suggested interpretation should make the world a better place. If not, maybe we need to wrestle some more with the text. To take a niche example, it's unethical to conclude from Leviticus texts that say *the life of every creature is in its blood*, that

blood transfusions should be banned. If that was our initial interpretation, we need to wrestle with the text some more.

2 Challenge

How does an interpretation compare with the attitudes prevailing when it was written? A high contrast with prevailing values and attitudes indicates a more likely interpretation. When Jesus teaches his followers to turn the other cheek, that's a high-contrast teaching that we need to consider directly and seriously if we call ourselves his followers. A low contrast suggests the teaching was perhaps more concerned with keeping God's community in good standing with the world around them, rather than revealing God's challenge to that world. Women are told to cover their heads so that the church would not be seen as a scandalous gathering in which the women dressed like ladies of the night. It's a low-contrast lesson from which we learn about not unnecessarily upsetting the world at large.

3 Inspiration

All scripture is inspired, as Paul wrote in a letter to Timothy referring to the Old Testament, but most of us don't think the Bible was literally dictated by God. So all scripture is useful, but it does need interpreting. There are some discrepancies in different biblical accounts of the same events. A healthy understanding of how the Bible came to be is not embarrassed by such occasional discrepancies, but expects them to be there.

4 Genre

We need to recognise the type of writing we are interpreting. For example, is Jonah history or morality tale? Is it telling us about the anatomy of whales or the attitude of some religious people to foreigners? Do we as a result of reading the book of Jonah go hunting for example of people swallowed by big fish, or do we examine our attitudes to migrants and followers of other religions?

5 Development

As Christians, we legitimately read the Old Testament through the lens of the New. And we read the New Testament through the lens of Jesus. So we do not have a 'flat' revelation, but one with peaks and valleys - and the stories and teaching of Jesus are surely the peaks.

6 Respect

At the same time, when reading the so-called Old Testament, we should remember that we are reading the holy book of the Jews, so we should not lightly dismiss passages, or insist that a Christian reading is more important than a Jewish one.

7 Culture

We engage with our world seeking to hear God speaking **through** our culture as well as **to** our culture. For example, God speaks **through** science to help us understand the nature of our world, and the nature of Genesis chapter 1 and 2 and God speaks in scripture **to** science to help us appreciate its meaning, the meaning of the world and the meaning of science itself.

OK so wrestle away with the Bible. In our wrestling we may, like Jacob, discover our identity. Why does this matter? It matters for the sake of the future of the church.

Paul wrote in our Romans' reading that he had *great sorrow and unceasing anguish* in his heart because his own Jewish people were often unresponsive to the gospel. This bothered him. He wrestled with it. He tried to work it all out.

A recent survey found that only 2% of young adults in the UK identify as Church of England. Baptists would be, I guess, less than a quarter of that figure.

If we have something special in Hearsall Baptist Church that we want to pass on to another generation, we are going to need to struggle. To struggle to find out who we are, what we do believe, and indeed, what we don't believe...

But do we care enough? Does this cause us *great sorrow and unceasing anguish* if we think that we might practically go extinct?

If it does bother us, we may feel we need to express our identity in our name. I don't mean we must necessarily change formally from Hearsall Baptist Church, but if we want to reach a new generation we are going to have to change our sense of who we are. Or at least clarify that identity.

Clarify it for ourselves. And express it in a way that communicates effectively to young people.

How about this:

Hearsall Baptist Church:

a positive community of radical Christians

Positive - we want to add something good to individuals and to life around us

Community - most people know what this means! We are people who enjoy getting together, in real life and online.

Radical - we want to go back to the root of what makes life worth living

Christians - we are followers of Jesus

You might have a better idea of who we are. Wrestle with it. Struggle with it. Face our past. Face our future. And when you've got something, why not share it with all of us?

Finally it wasn't only Jacob's identity that was questioned; it was also God's identity. For us, God is revealed in Jesus, who, like his illustrious predecessor Moses, fed hungry people in the wilderness.

As John's gospel prologue puts it: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

This we celebrate with all our hearts. In Jesus we see the identity of God. Who breaks bread and shares it with all humanity. And in relation to that God, we know ourselves at last. We are his beloved daughters and his beloved sons, transformed by grace and with hearts that are filled with a love that lasts forever. Amen.

Hymn (WT 306) Name **of All Majesty**

Verse 1

Name of all majesty, fathomless mystery,
King of the ages by angels adored;
Power and authority, splendour and dignity,
Bow to His mastery, Jesus is Lord!

Verse 2

Child of our destiny, God from eternity,
Love of the Father on sinners outpoured;
See now what God has done sending His only Son,
Christ the beloved One, Jesus is Lord!

Verse 3

Saviour of Calvary, costliest victory,
Darkness defeated and Eden restored;
Born as a man to die, nailed to a cross on high,
Cold in the grave to lie, Jesus is Lord!

Verse 4

Source of all sovereignty, light, immortality,
Life everlasting and heaven assured;
So with the ransomed, we praise Him eternally,
Christ in His majesty, Jesus is Lord!

The Grace

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ;
The love of God;
And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
Be with us all
Now and always. Amen.

Sung Blessing

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you
Wherever he may send you.
May he guide you through the wilderness,
Protect you through the storm.
May he bring you home rejoicing
At the wonders he has shown you.
May he bring you home rejoicing
Once again into our doors.