**Sunday 31st January 2021, Service**

**Sermon, Hymn choices and pointers for Prayers of Intercession – Revd Ruth Wollaston**

**Opening Words, opening prayers, Intercessions & Blessing – Revd Richard Bradley**

**Welcome and opening words:**

Good morning. I hope you are keeping well. This morning’s service is brought to you by two ministers. Revd Ruth Wollaston who is a minister in the Oldham and Tameside Missional Partnership and myself the Revd Richard Bradley a minister in the Rochdale, Bury and North Manchester Missional Partnership.

And so friends we come to worship each of us in our homes and whilst separated by space we are joined in the presence of God with Jesus our Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I want to share some words from Psalm 111:1-3:

**“1 Praise the LORD! I will thank the LORD with all my heart as I meet with his godly people. 2 How amazing are the deeds of the LORD! All who delight in him should ponder them. 3 Everything he does reveals his glory and majesty. His righteousness never fails.”** (NLT – New Living Translation)

We sing or read the words of our first hymn:

**Hymn: How sweet the name of Jesus sounds**

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| 1.. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  in a believer's ear!  It soothes his sorrows,  heals his wounds,  and drives away his fear. | 2.. It makes the wounded spirit whole,  and calms the troubled breast;  'tis manna to the hungry soul,  and to the weary rest. |
| 3.. Dear name! the rock on which I build,  my shield and hiding-place,  my never-failing treasury, filled  with boundless stores of grace. | 4.. Jesus! my shepherd, brother, friend,  my Prophet, Priest and King;  my Lord, my life, my way, my end,  accept the praise I bring. |
| 5.. Weak is the effort of my heart,  and cold my warmest thought;  but when I see Thee as Thou art,  I'll praise Thee as I ought. | 6.. Till then I would Thy love proclaim  with every fleeting breath;  and may the music of Thy name  refresh my soul in death! |
| John Newman ccli 169737 Streaming Licence 595811 | |

**Prayers of approach**

Approachable God, we come before you in prayer. We come to bring our praise and thanksgiving for all you have done, are doing and will do in the future. We come with inadequate words to a God who accepts them. For no words could fully express the love we have for you and for the gift of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

We come to give acknowledging your presence with each one of us reading thee words today. Some of us may be with family members, or people we live with and others of us may be alone but we all have Jesus with us and for that, loving God, we thank you.

We praise you for the beauty of the world. For the beauty of each season of the year.

We praise you for family and friends.

We praise you for the NHS and all who work within it – medical or non-medical staff and volunteers.

We praise you for the Covid vaccines and pray the roll out of them would increase not decrease.

We praise you for the our church family, whilst we cannot gather for in person worship at this time we can and must still worship you in the comfort of our homes.

But, Lord, we come into the light of Jesus which shows up our imperfections. And for those we come and confess our weakness and frailty. Forgive us for times when we have let you down and not radiated the light and presence of Jesus. We seek your forgiveness and ask for your forgiveness.

And though apart from others we join together in saying the words of The Lord’s Prayer….

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 trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory,

for ever and ever.

Amen.

We read our Bible reading for today before we read the sermon written for us by the Revd Ruth Wollaston….

**Bible Reading: Matthew 14:22-33**

**Jesus walks on the water**

22Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. 23After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, 24and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

25Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. 26When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. ‘It’s a ghost,’ they said, and cried out in fear.

27But Jesus immediately said to them: ‘Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.’

28‘Lord, if it’s you,’ Peter replied, ‘tell me to come to you on the water.’

29‘Come,’ he said.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came towards Jesus. 30But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’

31Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’

32And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. 33Then those who were in the boat worshipped him, saying, ‘Truly you are the Son of God.’ (NIV Bible)

**Sermon on St Matthew 14:22-33**

I grew up in a seaside town. I have happy memories of excursions in small boats- only on a few occasions however, if the wind whipped up, a pleasant afternoon would turn into an ordeal involving drenched clothes and a feeling of sea sickness!

This story in St Matthew’s Gospel is about far more than the disciples surviving a storm in an open boat- I doubt whether any of you have been out in an open boat recently, but I think we have all had the experience in the last year of being in situations ‘way beyond our control’. There have been moments, during so much news of the pandemic when even the strongest amongst us have felt afraid, powerless, or left feeling that we shall be overwhelmed with the enormity of this pandemic. This gospel reading speaks to us all!

Firstly, Jesus did not keep his disciples in a risk free environment- they were exposed to danger- What matters is not questioning why they were exposed to danger in a storm, but understanding how they faced that difficulty . Jesus did not leave his disciples all alone-

‘Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water.....’

Perhaps they thought , in the midst of that storm ‘where is Jesus? Why did he let us come out here? The most important point is that Jesus did NOT leave his disciples all alone.the last year has tested us all- as we hear of people dying, widespread job losses, families struggling to cope- Where is God in all this? Just as Jesus was with his disciples in the roughest sea, God is still with us in the midst of our most difficult and testing times.

‘Jesus spoke to them at once- Courage it is I , Do not be afraid’

The disciples had to choose, whether to act with courage or be ruled by fear. We have to put our faith into action making that choice too!

At the very beginning of the first Lockdown, on one of my Chaplaincy visits to Tommyfield Market, I remember talking to an employee on one of the stalls who was really panic stricken about facing closure of the market- all ‘normal life’ was falling to pieces around her. We sat down and talked about our parents or grandparents who had faced the outbreak of war- they came through it-‘now it is our turn to deal with this without being afraid’. She has talked to me many times since that awful day. I think we both realised we had a choice and shouldn’t let fear take over!

It has been and continues to be a privilege to listen to, and to talk to people working in the shops and markets , in these times when nothing is’normal’!

Secondly, the disciple Peter is brave but impetuous as usual and says:

‘Lord, if it is really you, order me to come out on the water to you’.

‘ Come’ answers Jesus.

Peter shows that he hears the voice of Jesus- He wants to be bold and show the other disciples ‘ he could do it’ -----but he also shows real human fears and weaknesses. When he looked at Jesus through the waves, he swam through them. Only when he looked down, he began to sink. Like Peter, we have to face that choice- to look to Jesus who walks on the waves, or to look down at the waves in despair and sink.

As I have thought about this story, I have compared the swirling stormy waves to the constant news of the number of people infected, the rising death tolls, the daily news of businesses collapsing-----the waves of bad news go on and on and though it is vital to be informed- it does feel like looking into a murky sea much of the time. Is that all we can do- look down in despair and feel that we are sinking? Take heart from the experience of the disciple Peter, in his moment of weakness, he was upheld by Jesus. He found strength.

Many people saw in the new year saying ‘Good Riddance to 2020’ That is a view we would all echo- however, I think so many Christian people and some of the smallest churches, as well as the larger ones have been doing a fantastic job of communicating with each other and with their communities. We have not left people to sink in constant waves of despair. We have been there, helping people to look upwards through their Christian faith to face life with courage and dignity .

In the midst of the worst storm, the disciples of Jesus found He was still with them. Don’t just look down at the waves- look to the one who walks upon them, and there find strength.

**Hymn: In heavenly love abiding**

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| 1.. In heavenly love abiding,  no change my heart shall fear;  and safe is such confiding,  for nothing changes here.  The storm may roar without me,  my heart may low be laid;  but God is round about me,  and can I be dismayed? | 2.. Wherever He may guide me,  no want shall turn me back;  my Shepherd is beside me,  and nothing can I lack:  His wisdom ever waketh,  His sight is never dim;  He knows the way He taketh,  and I will walk with Him. |
| 3.. Green pastures are before me,  which yet I have not seen;  bright skies will soon be o'er me,  where darkest clouds have been.  My hope I cannot measure,  my path to life is free;  my Saviour has my treasure,  and He will walk with me. | Anna L. Waring David Jenkins  ccli 169737  Streaming licence 595811 |

**Prayers of intercession**

As part of our prayers today Ruth (Wollaston) asked that we pray for the retail sector which has been hit extremely hard by the restrictions brought on because of the pandemic. Part of Ruth’s ministry has been and is to Oldham Town Centre where she has served as the coordinating chaplain. So we will focus on retails as part of our prayers today. There will be moments of silence within these prayers for you to bring your own prayers or to wait on God and listen for His voice….

Let us pray….

Heavenly Father, who loves all of humankind, who sent His son for the whole of humankind we come with our prayers of concern. We pray for children and young people hit who have been hit hard by the pandemic and whose education has been affected in some way or another. We pray that you would hold them in your love and care. We think of parents/carers balancing home schooling and working from home.

*We keep a moment of silence….*

We pray for those who work in the retail sector. We pray for those who are on the bring of going bankrupt because of loss of revenue. We pray for those who are furloughed who may or may not have a job to return to post lockdown. We pray for those who have already lost their job within this sector and who are struggling to find another one.

*We keep a moment of silence….*

We pray for the NHS and all who work within its structures. We pray for the medics who are stretched beyond anything they have experienced before. We pray for the non-medical staff who are also doing all they can to support others who treat patients.   
We pray for the scientists who have worked extremely hard to create a vaccine and we pray for the roll out of all the vaccines on stream now and those that may yet still come on stream.

We pray for those unwell in hospital whether with Covid or other illnesses.

*We keep a moment of silence….*

We pray for the church in all places. For churches who will struggle to come out of the other side of lockdown and whose futures are somewhat fragile.

We pray for churches who are seeking to try new ways of offering worship during these times of the pandemic. Bless them and those they connect with.

*We keep a moment of silence….*

And finally we pray for ourselves and those who we love. Comfort those who are grieving or feeling a sense of loss today. Be with each one of us that we might radiate the light of Jesus and in that radiating others may come to a knowledge of the love of God.

*We keep a moment of silence….*

We offer all our prayers in and through the name of Jesus, Amen.

We now read or sing our last hymn:

**Closing Hymn: Will your anchor hold**

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| 1.. Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,  will your anchor drift, or firm remain? | 2. Will your anchor hold in the straights of fear,  when the breakers roar and the reef is near?  While the surges rage, and the wild winds blow,  shall the angry waves then your back o’erflow? |
| 3.. Will your anchor hold in the floods of death,  when the waters cold chill your latest breath?  On the rising tide you can never fail,  while your anchor holds within the veil. | 4.. Will your eyes behold through the morning light,  the city of gold and the harbour bright?  Will your anchor safe by the heavenly shore,  when life's storms are passed for evermore? |
| Chorus: *We have an anchor that keeps the soul*  *steadfast and sure while the billows roll;*  *fastened to the rock which cannot move,*  *grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!* | Priscilla Jane Owens  ccli 169737  Streaming licence 595811 |

**Blessing**

May God’s blessing surround you each day,  
as you trust him and walk in his way.   
May His presence within   
guard and keep you from sin,  
go in peace, go in joy, go in love.

Amen.   
  
(Complete Mission Praise, number 460, © 1982 Cliff Barrows ccli 169737, Streaming licence 595811)