

**14th June 2020 10am “While we were still sinners Christ died for us”
Transcript only of announcement, reading and talk**

Service led by Denise Coomber, announcement by Kim Matthews,
Reading by Ruth Coomber, talk by Andrew Attwood

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Announcement about delaying opening of building

[Kim Matthews, churchwarden:]

Thank you very much, Denise. Good morning. So for those of you who don't know me, I'm Kim Matthews, one of the wardens at St John's, and it's lovely to be able to speak to you this morning, and I know that we are all really looking forward to being back together – it's doing this that makes me realise how much I miss you all. And we just wanted to update you following the government announcement this week that churches can consider opening for a limited number of purposes. And we thought we should let you know what our thinking is behind our decision at St. John's not to open the building at Warwick Road for the time being.

So we're currently all accessing God through Jesus with the Holy Spirit, anywhere, wherever we are. And although we value and appreciate the building, we don't need to be in a church building to do that. And our feeling is that the church building – the main purpose of opening the church building – would be for us to get together for prayer or worship together. And that's not yet allowed.

If we want to open for private prayer that would require quite a lot of investment in time to prepare the building and the facilities that we need to do it safely: separate access and egress points, hand sanitizers, marking out spacing, all that kind of thing, and providing someone there for security. And at the moment we feel our energy is probably better spent continuing to focus on what God is teaching us through this time, whilst we look forward to being together again at a time we can gather together again. And we will need to do quite a lot of preparation for that as well, as I'm sure you realise.

We are also mindful however of the needs of the wider community, and we realise that there might be those that want to have somewhere quiet for prayer or reflection. And if there was a group of you that felt drawn to providing that facility, which will involve quite a lot of work in setting up the procedures and following a careful process, but if you feel drawn to that, then please let us know and we can think a bit further about it. And finally from me just to say thank you for your ongoing patience in all this: I know that this is a difficult time and we are really all looking forward to a time when we can get together in person. And I really look forward to seeing you all. Thanks very much.

Reading: Romans 5:1-11 [NIVUK]

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; ⁴ perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts

through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

Talk

[Andrew Attwood:]

Thank you, Ruth. Really good to have you read to us. Thank you, Denise, for leading us. It's excellent to be here folks: it's good to have yet another occasion when we can be together, albeit remotely through screen.

Just to set this particular morning's teaching in context, as a church we've found ourselves very much encouraged to be drawing near to God and it seemed appropriate this morning to draw near to God through some core teachings, some core words from Paul's letters to the Romans as a way of anchoring our current experience into something that is fixed and solid and reliable, something that never changes. I will be focusing particularly on Romans 5 verses 6-8, so if you have a Bible to hand, find Romans 5:6-8 - that's what I'm going to be concentrating on, beginning that line "You see, just at the right time."

It's an interesting question, "just at the right time." So much seems to be out of kilter these days when we think of what time it is. I'm beginning to lose track of what day it is, never mind what time it is. And yet, this particular phrase in Paul's teaching talks about a significant moment, in what we would call salvation history - the history of God's plan through the world. A Kairos¹ moment, not Chronos as in just the order, the normal order of time taken, but a significant Kairos moment - a God moment, when the time was right for God to reveal Jesus Christ. Why did God reveal Jesus then, 2000 years ago? Well, if you think about it like a narrative within a story - my guess is, most of us read novels, or maybe watch movies, and you know there are moments in stories, either on screen or in a book, where they hit you with something that is going to be just right, just that moment. And suddenly the plot changes, and the story shifts. We know with the story of Israel, that there had been all kinds of ups and downs for the people of Israel, where they draw near to God and then find themselves slipping away and they draw back to God because of the prophets calling them back to the Covenant and time and time again Israel will find itself stumbling away, and God having to rescue them. This particular theme which effectively is a theme of and rescue and fall, and rescue and hopelessness, is the moment where God says, "Now you know how you are, now let me send my Son." In other words, the nature of humanity was revealed through the story of Israel. We don't usually like to hear this, but this morning I want you to dare to be grown-up about this, because today's talk is about understanding the nature of human beings, and how this actually helps reveal now the extraordinary love of God.

1 <https://www.lifeofasteward.com/chronos-kairos/>

The second line in that section says, "While we were still powerless, God sent Jesus." While we were still powerless. Just before we went live today, I was having an exchange with Kim, and we were talking about the thunderstorm that happened last night - you will all be aware of it in Kenilworth - the sky went a funny colour, there was sheet lightning, there was fork lightning and Kim said he was in the middle of an internet conversation with someone, and his internet went down. He was powerless, the power went out, and I'm guessing all of us have had those experiences in life where your house suddenly goes dark and you don't know what's gone on. Maybe something has tripped the switch on the power block, and you don't know what to do and you rush for either a torch or a candle and you have to kind of grope around in the dark. The nature of the human condition is fundamentally, in spiritual terms, powerless. We often have the illusion of control, and we often have all kinds of thoughts and circumstances that give us the impression of self-sufficiency. But actually, in reality, without our connection to God, there is no power at all, not significant power. There's no power, for example, to live well, not long term. There's no power to resist things that are wrong: this is the nature of human beings in our fallen state and I'm going to be emphasising this just at the first part of this talk, it's important that when we look at God's Word, it's giving a diagnostic of how human beings have been, before we get rescued by Jesus. And so we have this strong emphasis of not being in control of ourselves, never mind anything else.

Imagine with me for a minute a young boy who, because of his genetic inheritance, let's say from his dad, is born with a crippling illness, let's call it, say, cystic fibrosis. And this cystic fibrosis from birth inhibits some of his growth that prevents his breathing from being normal. Commonly with people who have cystic fibrosis they might be a little thinner and shorter, because it stunts growth. But imagine this particular boy to be precocious. This is a boy who's resistant to his limitations, almost in denial of his limitations. Imagine this boy growing up to be a bit of a strong-minded teenager and imagine one evening this boy going out with his friends, probably against the wishes of his parents, and his friend lets him drive his car. While this young lad is not a capable driver, it's late at night, and imagine just through sheer precocious bloody-mindedness he floors [the accelerator of] the car and ends up in an accident. Imagine this young man now disabled, physically, because he's in a car crash. He began with an inherited condition, and now through his own actions he's even more disabled.

This is a kind of picture of the inherited condition of the human race. You may think, "what a jaundiced view, what a limited view we have of human beings. Of course human beings are better than that." Well, for sure, the image of God is writ large over every human being and so we do aspire to do good, and we sometimes achieve it every now and again. But there is something fundamental that we need to recognise to do with our basic core nature. Let me give you a classic example from the Gospel accounts where this becomes increasingly clear, even in the life of one of Jesus disciples. I mentioned this in a talk I did recently for Knights' Meadow. And there's a section in John 13, where Jesus is speaking to His disciples about what's going to happen next. This is at the Last Supper. And He speaks about going away. And Simon Peter says this in John 13.

³⁶ Simon Peter asked him, "Lord, where are you going?"

Jesus replied, "Where I am going, you cannot follow now, but you will follow later."

³⁷ Peter asked, "Lord, why can't I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you."

³⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Will you really lay down your life for me? Very truly I tell you, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times!"

We know in the other accounts from other gospels, Peter protests, "No, I won't. I will not leave you!" and there's a kind of a rising cry from the others in the room who go, "No we won't leave you, we won't leave you." There is something blind about even Jesus' immediate disciples, and later we realise that Peter indeed does do exactly what Jesus predicted he would do. He denies, he runs, he hides. We want to deny our frailty, we want to deny our fundamental weaknesses. And so we press through, and usually make matters worse, just like that story I mentioned of the boy with cystic fibrosis, who ends up even more disabled through his own actions. We have to admit some level of powerlessness, some level of limitation.

The next line in this passage says, "Christ died for the ungodly." "While we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." What does 'ungodly' mean? these are all very negative terms, but there's something about it that we have to recognise if we're going to move forwards as followers of God. We still have His image in us, we still are made in the image of God. But there's something about our nature that gets twisted in on ourselves. Now despite all of the good aspirations of our society, despite all of the best intentions of every individual, there is no reform, there is no education, there is no upbringing, there is no supportive culture, there's no political environment or psychological care that can deal with our fundamental broken nature. I can remember as a younger man, hearing someone like Tony Blair saying, "Our priority is education, education, education," as though this was going to be the key that would unlock everything. And of course we should endorse and support all good things in society that are helpful in moving people forward, but they're not curative. They're not going to solve what only God can solve. There is a flaw in us that only God can address. Just to make this crystal clear, there's something else that Jesus himself says in John's Gospel: John chapter, 8 verses 34-36, John 8:34-36 says this, Jesus speaking to a group of people.

³⁴ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. ³⁵ Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. ³⁶ So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

We're beginning to get a glimpse of some hope now. But before we get to the hope, Jesus wants to underline the problem. And the problem, fundamentally, is that because of the way we human beings are, we end up addicted to, and trapped by, our sinfulness. It's not a word that is at all popular in the 21st century, this idea of being sinners. It feels derogatory, it feels uncomfortable, an upsetting title to wear. But Jesus is describing it as a condition. He's not just talking about a list of bad things that people do, He's saying there is something about this state that is a state of slavery. In your mind and other minds it may be a picture that you can understand quickly and clearly. When you think of the horrible history of slavery that our country was involved in, we know what it is to put into captivity human beings. It's something that we are to be ashamed of, from a historical point of view, the idea of restricting and chaining up and owning people. Yet, ironically, this is the very state we ourselves are in because of our habitual pattern of doing the wrong thing, of thinking the wrong thing. It's a bit like my and your habitual weakness. I've joked for many years about me and pork pies, but it could apply to anything. It could apply to anything that you're weak over something you're inclined to do and you tell yourself again and again, don't do it. But you find yourself slipping in that area. Slavery, captured, unable to break free. So Paul begins to talk about the really amazing Good News. And this is something that we need to embrace, as we increasingly draw near to God. We will not be able to find our way to God in our own strength.

Some of you have may have made some tremendous headway in your praying, in your Bible reading, in your searching and seeking out for God, but you can't make it on your own. Paul says this: "Very rarely would anyone die for a righteous person.

(Though) for a good person, someone may dare to die." He's exploring the phenomena that some people in history do actually lay themselves down for the sake of someone else, or for a great cause, for example. People who get slaughtered in the conflict because they're standing up for something that is right. But usually, people die for good causes, people die for worthy, noble, important, significant causes or worthy, noble, significant people want to throw themselves in front of the bullet so that the important person doesn't get hit. That would give good reason to lay your life down, if someone was that good, if someone were worth saving. But this is where we get to see the amazing extent of God's love for myself, for you, for the whole of the human race. "But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." while we were still sinners, Christ died for us - this amazes me. This amazes me because I know what I'm like. This is defining love - God demonstrates His own love. And He demonstrates it by dying.

While we were still sinners. He was not waiting for you to be better. He was not waiting for me to come up to scratch. He was not watching for the story of the human race to hit some moments of progress where He thinks. "Okay. They deserve it now." He knew. Christ knew there would never be a moment when we, when you, when all of us were good enough for what He was going to offer. So He defines the quality of God's love by dying *while* we are in this wretched, powerless state.

And it's important to recognise that this is a *demonstration* of love. The Cross, the Cross of Jesus in history, in real time actually reveals God's real love, for us, it's not a theory. Jesus doesn't talk about the love of God only. He doesn't just say, "God loves you," as though it's some kind of philosophical position. He shows it. He bears His body for torture and execution. And He shows it - He demonstrates His love.

And He demonstrates His love *for us*. There is a focus to this love that's not a general, "Let me show you what love might look like." He's doing it for you and me. He's doing it because He knows what you and I are really, really like. It's not some empty demo. He's applying it to something real. And the amazing Good News about this is that the act of Christ's death on the Cross declares how valuable you are. Actually, this is your real worth. There is no other measure that compares to this.

And I just want to show you how valuable you are by describing the One who died for you. It says, "Christ died for us." Not anyone. There wasn't some kind of rogue who was going to go on the cross. It wasn't Barabbas who died for us. This was the Son of God. This is the most precious, the most beloved, the most perfect: He was sinless, the most loving human being. You see on the Cross, Jesus chooses to be our new representative. Christ the innocent one. Christ the unjustly arrested and abused, Christ, the one who is wrongly executed for our wrongdoing. It's remarkable.

And this is the point I want to leave you with, to focus on, to help anchor you in, as you draw near to God. When it says, "God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were sinners Christ died for us" this is substitution. This is 'in our place'. The sentence was ours. You just imagine for a moment, that it's Death Row in America. Just imagine that someone has a day or two before they're going to be executed. And this person is set free from their prison cell, and someone else goes into the prison cell and stays there. And they're executed in their place. That is what substitution is. You may still wrestle over why this was necessary. Why on earth did God need to do this? This is to do with justice! This is to do with God's justice! God's justice can't just ignore what is wrong. We can't turn a blind eye and pretend that things aren't bad or wrong. You think of the myriad of terrible things that happened in world history, never mind in my own heart. God can't ignore that. But He chooses to bear it himself. God the

Son takes it upon himself. How does it work? Because of who dies, because of who He is, as He dies for us, the death of Jesus Christ is completely and utterly effective. The death of Jesus Christ for us removes and absorbs the whole penalty, the whole problem. Everything is removed and taken away, because He bears it for us.

And this is where the story changes in terms of terms. Paul has said all the way through this: "while we *were* sinners." That's not the title that God applies to you and me any more. If you and I have chosen to say 'yes' to Jesus Christ, if you and I have said 'yes' to Jesus being our representative, if you've recognised what He did for you, the term 'sinner' no longer applies to you. That's a formal descriptor of how we were in the past tense. That's how things used to be. But now, according to this whole passage from Romans, and I'd encourage you to read it from verse 1 all the way through to 11, the strong emphasis from Paul is: now, because of Jesus Christ, we are justified. Not because of your own self-justification, but because God has changed the status. No longer a sinner, now you are justified, which means you are adopted into God's holy, wonderful family. Now when we talk about the idea of being a child of God, it's not this kind of universal idea that applies to the whole human race. This is adopted into God's specific particular family. Justified, no longer a sinner.

You know, every now and again when we were before lockdown I would do communion, at one of the 8 a.m. services. And that service uses words from what's called the Book of Common Prayer. Some of you will be very familiar with this but some of you won't. The Book of Common Prayer was written primarily by Cranmer all the way back in the time of Henry VIII. And during that time he was writing liturgy that had words that went something like this:

We do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table.

These are the words that are still said in communion services. "We are not worthy." Do you know what? That's wrong theology, for a Christian. Previously, we had no worth because we were still in that category of being powerless, trapped by our own sin, slaves to sin. Now, because we're Christians, we inherit Christ's worth. God the Father looks at you and me, as though we are like Christ because we're in Christ now. So now we *are* worthy. I'm inclined, when I do communions in the future to not saying "We are not worthy so much as to gather with the crumbs under thy table." I want to start saying, "We *were* not worthy." Because we are worthy now, not sinners any longer. This is all to do with God's incredible, incredible grace. But here's a thought just to finish with: the only way you can properly appreciate this grace, the only way you can properly receive it, and live in it and live out of it for the sake of others, is if you recognise where you were before you got it. If you or I are in denial, like Peter was about his state, about whether he could do something or not, you won't be able to receive the grace, but if you recognise how you were, then you can move into the grace of God.

Last illustration. Imagine for a moment that there is a person who is going into hospital. It's not for COVID this time. It's for cancer. Imagine this person being wheeled in a wheelchair into a beautiful ward. Maybe it's a private hospital, I don't know, but it's beautifully decked out. There's a lovely private room for this person, they put this person to bed, they clump the cushions up, they make sure that they've got their menu sorted for their meals, they make them very, very comfortable and they say good words to them: they say, "You know, you're so valuable, it's wonderful to have you here! What would you like to eat? What would you like to drink?" and they make this person feel very much at home. But just imagine that they don't mention that this person has

cancer. Just imagine that they don't tell them. Just imagine this person is oblivious to it. And the medics, for reasons known only to them, are going, "Ssh. Don't say." That's not going to cure the patient, that's not going to help the patient. Now we all know people who've been through cancer treatment, and it can involve surgery or chemo. And both of those things are hard, both of those things can lead to pain and discomfort and sickness, on the journey towards health. What's the most gracious thing to do to someone who is in this state? I would always want the medic, all my relatives to tell me if something was wrong. I would want to encourage you and me to be honest about what we are like without Christ. Because when we're honest about that, then the reality and the power and the love and the increasing influence of God's grace in our life is much more significantly felt and known. So I want to encourage you, be honest about where you have been, even be honest about where you are, if this doesn't apply to you yet. And then you will be able to enter into the extraordinary Good News, "Christ died for us while we were still sinners." He didn't wait for you or me to be good. So this morning, enter into an honesty about how the human race is. And then you'll be able to receive more of His grace, more of Christ's goodness.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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