**COVENANT COMMUNITY ONLINE SERVICE**

*Presenter: Revd Dr Calvin T Samuel Preacher: Revd Graham Horsley*

**4th Sunday of Easter**

**Sunday, 3rd May 2020**

**~ Encountering God’s Spirit of Love ~**

**Welcome & Introduction**:

Good Morning. Welcome to this covenant community online service for the 4th Sunday of Easter.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

My name is Calvin Samuel and I’m Methodist minister for the towns of Rochford and Rayleigh in the County of Essex. We are internationally dispersed because of the global pandemic but we come together in worship as a covenant community.

Being filled with the Spirit is a phrase that can sometimes easily identify a person’s churchmanship. If you are from a Pentecostal or charismatic church background the language of being Spirit-filled is perhaps more commonplace. In Methodist circles like the ones I frequent that kind of language is less common. And yet it is profoundly biblical language. And more than language it was the aspiration of early Christians, to be so full of the Spirit of God that their lives showed signs of God’s glory and grace.

Last week we explored the journey of two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24. I ended the service with a reminder that their journey has become a metaphor for deepening discipleship and that Easter is an invitation to go deeper. We will not be satisfied to wade about in the shallows. We want to launch out into the deep, to grow in faith, to discover by God’s Spirit that there is far more to this faith journey than we have so far discovered. There must be more than this.

This week I’m delighted that my friend and colleague, the Revd Graham Horsley, who is the National Fresh Expressions Missioner within the Methodist Connexion, will be our preacher today. Graham will be taking us further on that journey exploring that aspiration of growing deeper in God.

But let’s begin with a song of praise: All Hail the Power of Jesus’ name

**Hymn: All Hail the power of Jesus’ name** (StF 342)

All Hail the power of Jesus’ name

Let angels prostrate fall;

*Bring forth the royal diadem,*

*And crown Him Lord of all!*

Ye chosen seed of Israel's race,

Ye ransomed from the fall,

*Hail Him Who saves you by His grace,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

Let every tongue and every tribe,
Responsive to his call

*To Him all majesty ascribe,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

O That with all the sacred throng

we at his feet may fall

*We’ll join the everlasting song*

*And crown Him Lord of all!*

*﻿Edward Perronet (1726–1792)*

**PRAYERS**

God of truth, you are worthy

of higher praise than we can offer,

and of purer worship than we can imagine.

By your Holy Spirit, assist us in our prayers

and draw us to yourself, so that what is lacking

in our thoughts and actions and in our words and music,

may be supplied by your overflowing love;

through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

**SCRIPTURE**

In 1926 the Methodist Church in Rayleigh began a series of Monday afternoon meetings called The Sisterhood, a devotional meeting for ladies. Nearly 60 years later, in 1985, it changed its name to the Women's Fellowship but continued its varied programme and social activities. Before lockdown the Women’s Fellowship met each week attracting women from Rayleigh, Rochford and wider afield.

The Fellowship isn't a club but a Christian organisation and that is an important part of its identity. There is a relaxed, friendly atmosphere and members enjoy an interesting programme of speakers and activities each week, which includes tea and chat but meetings always start and finish with a hymn and prayer.

For 94 years now the Women’s Fellowship have been a source of support, encouragement and fellowship within the local congregations but have also supported events organised through Methodist Women in Britain. They keep in touch with sick and housebound friends, especially important now in lockdown. It’s a place of laughter but also place for being serious about faith and service.  Their guiding values might be best summed up as Love and Loyalty.

Graham Horsley who will preach for us later on was originally due to come to Rayleigh on the occasion of the 94th anniversary of the Women’s Fellowship. He has kindly agreed to preach in any case.

Our scripture lessons today are read by two longstanding members of the congregations and the Women’s Fellowship. Carole Glendinning, a member of Rochford Methodist, reads our Old Testament Lesson and Sheila Cooper, a member of Rayleigh Methodist, reads our New Testament Lesson.

**Jeremiah 31.1–6**

*At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.*

*Again, I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.*

*For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: “Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God.”*

**Ephesians 3.14–21**

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

*Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

**Holy Spirit you are welcome here**

There's nothing worth more that will ever come close,

Nothing can compare; you're our living hope.

Your Presence, Lord

I've tasted and seen, of the sweetest of loves
Where my heart becomes free and my shame is undone.

Your Presence, Lord

*Holy Spirit, you are welcome here
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere
Your glory God is what our hearts long for
To be overcome by your presence, Lord.*

[Sung twice]

Let us become more aware of your presence
Let us experience the Glory of Your Goodness

*Holy Spirit, you are welcome here…*

*Katie Torwalt & Bryan Torwalt*

**The Sermon – Revd Graham Horsley**

I want to talk to you today about one of the most amazing prayers in the Bible. It’s special to me for a number of reasons that I’ll explain later.

The prayer is found in Ephesians 3.14-21.

Why does Paul pray this prayer for the Ephesians? Because if we don’t know we’re loved by God, we’ll not be able to live well for him, and because he has an inkling that the Ephesian Christians need to hear it.

But let’s step back for a moment and ask an important question: why does God love us? Is it because: We come to church (or join in worship online) - no, though that may help. Is it because we love our neighbours as ourselves - no but it will make the world a better place. Is it because we’ve repented of my sin and asked Jesus to be our Lord and Saviour - no but God loves it when people do.

God loves us because it’s his nature - it’s about him not us!

In creation, in Jesus life, death & resurrection, in the gift at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit — we see three key demonstrations of God’s love:

We don’t deserve it, we can’t earn it! It’s his amazing free gift.

Why do we need to know the love of God?

Because until we do, we can’t be who we were created to be. God’s love transforms who we are and frees us to love ourselves and to love others. With God’s love in our hearts, we can be a blessing to the whole world.

When I first became a Christian, I asked Jesus into my life not because I was conscious of being a sinner - I was just an average teenager, I asked Jesus to be my saviour because like many teenagers I was desperate to know that I was loved. It was the love of Jesus that drew me, not a need for forgiveness.

You may be thinking this is all very obvious, I’ve known it for years. But I wonder if you ever struggle to ‘get it’? To feel and know that you are loved?

Paul knew you would! That’s why he mentions love 3 times in this prayer (verses 17, 18 & 19) - preachers trick! Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, then tell them what you’ve told them.

He also mentions power three times (16, 18 & 20) - it’s not head knowledge or fuzzy feeling it's an encounter with God through his Spirit. The Ephesian church was begun by an apostle called Apollos who knew about God the Father and Jesus the Son but didn’t know about the Holy Spirit - read the story in Acts 19:1-7. When Paul met them, he prayed that they would all be filled with the Spirit, but there was always the danger that they would forget about the Holy Spirit and stop seeking his power.

Without the power of the Holy Spirit our best efforts are doomed to failure. We don’t have the depth or quality of love naturally that God the Holy Spirit can release into our lives supernaturally and through us into the lives of others.

We may know all this in theory, but we don’t always experience it. Sometimes because we’ve never been filled with the Holy Spirit like those disciples in Ephesus when Paul first met them. Sometimes it's because the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives gets blocked. How does this happen? I’d like to share two quite personal stories of how this might happen.

I used to attend a mid-week prayer meeting in Warrington led by Dr Bill Davies, one of the leaders of the charismatic movement in Methodism in the 1970s. We were worshipping God when the Holy Spirit moved very powerfully among us. We fell silent because we knew God was doing something significant but didn’t know what. After what seemed to be a very long time, a lady who was attending the group for the first time spoke up. She said, ‘I shouldn’t be here - I’m too dirty!” The Holy Spirit had made her aware of her sinfulness. Bill prayed with her and she asked for her sins to be forgiven and was filled with the Holy Spirit and with joy. The blockage was the wrong things she’d done in her life. Sometimes even people who’ve been Christians for a long time have not been set free from bitterness, resentfulness and anger and other damaging actions and emotions. Perhaps we need to ask God to set us free from something bad to make room in our lives for the Holy Spirit to fill us with God’s love?

The second story is an experience I had at a John Wimber ‘Signs and Wonders’ conference in the late 1980’s. We began to pray in small groups around the hall. A lady sitting near me asked us to pray for her because she really struggled to believe in God. We began to pray, listening for the Holy Spirit as we prayed. The number 8 kept coming into my mind. I prayed that God would take it away if wasn’t from him, but it didn’t go away, it became stronger. I asked the lady if the number 8 had any significance to her. She replied, “my mother died when I was 8 years old. We prayed some more and someone asked - how were you told that your mother had died. She replied, “I was told that Jesus had taken her to be with him.” Ever since then Jesus had not appeared to her as a loving saviour, but rather as the horrible person who’d taken her mother away. We prayed that she would be set free from this misperception and she encountered the love of Jesus in an amazing, transforming way. She needed to be set free from what had been done to her (with the best of intentions) before she could experience the love of Jesus. For other people it’s things that have been done to them with malicious intentions that they need to be set free from.

A third blockage is much more subtle. It happens to Christians who have definitely been filled with the Holy Spirit and encountered the love of God in a powerful transforming way. However, life gets busy and we get knocked about by all sorts of things that drain the love out of us.

In the last two years I’ve conducted funerals for five different people who were very close to me. Two of them much younger than me. Most recently and only a couple of weeks ago I conducted my father’s funeral under the strange conditions that lockdown has brought about. Experiences like that have a cumulative effect on us. They can easily undermine our faith in a loving God.

To make sure I keep on being filled with the power and love of God, I’ve learnt the Ephesians prayer off by heart and pray it most days - sometimes several times a day. It’s a great thing to do whilst walking the dog! I pray it over and over because I need to filled with the love of God over and over. Otherwise I run dry.

I’d like to finish by praying the prayer from Ephesians 3:14-21. I’d like to invite you to pray it with me too.

It may be that first you need to ask God to remove some of the obstacles we’ve just talked about.

Let’s be quiet for a moment as we invite the Holy Spirit to come.

Then let’s pray:

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

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.**

**Prayers** –*Let us pray.*

Gracious God, as we rejoice that we are called the family of God.

We hold before you today all who are chosen, not in love but hatred,

in particular those whose faith makes them a target for discrimination.

We pray for the leaders the nations of the world.

By the power of your Spirit we pray that you would

give them the wisdom to know and the strength to do what is right.

We remember all who work for reconciliation,

in humanitarian aid, and the emergency services;

those who support the elderly and the ill, in body or mind.

We pray too for business leaders, those in financial services and the media, and all who serve the common good.

May we discover in their labours signs of divine blessing.

We pray for the victims of injustice and abuse,

for all who are anxious today, and for those who are facing death.

In particular we hold before you those separated fro m loved ones because of Covid-19.

May they know the blessing of Christ’s peace.

We pray for ourselves, that you fill us with your Spirit

of divine love and so enable us to become

agents of divine blessing, wherever you place us.

Merciful Father, accept these prayers,

for the sake of your Son, Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

We draw all our prayers together in the prayer that Jesus gave us

in its modern form. The words will appear on your screen:

**Our Father in heaven,**

**hallowed be your Name,**

**your kingdom come, your will be done,**

**on earth as in heaven.**

**Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins,**

**as we forgive those who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial**

**and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,**

**now and forever. Amen.**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Graham has powerfully reminded us today of our need for the empowering Spirit in our daily lives. This is true at all times but it seems all the more true today as we navigate these unprecedented days of Lockdown amidst a global pandemic and the global economic catastrophe that is emerging.

Our final hymn, *Waiting Here for You*, is a prayer that I invite you to make your own. We wait on God to enable us to become all he calls us to be.

**Waiting Here for You**

If faith can move the mountains, let the mountains move
We come with expectation, waiting here for You: waiting here for You.

You’re the Lord of all creation, and still You know my heart
The Author of Salvation, You’ve loved me from the start.

*Waiting here for You with our hands lifted high in praise
And it's You we adore, Singing Alleluia.*

You are everything You’ve promised, Your faithfulness is true
And we're desperate for Your presence All we need is You.

*Waiting here for You…*

Alleluia, Alleluia, singing alleluia, singing alleluia

*Waiting here for You…*

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

*Martin Smith/Chris Tomlin/Jesse Reeves*

**THE BLESSING**

God the Father,

by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead,

strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life;

and may almighty God bless you,

the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

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