

January 24th

Prayers of Reconciliation

Loving God

We have the wonder of a new day of your creation before us. Are we ready for it? Do we deserve it? What part would you like us to play in it? What can we do to make this new day wonderful? Wonderful for all.

All too often, like the snows that have settled around us lately, we are in need of a thaw. We can be cold, fixed, shrouded in an icy layer of inaction or unfeeling, while our neighbour sitting next to us in the pew is in need. While our neighbour in the next street tries to cope. While our neighbour in the next city struggles to manage. While our neighbour in Afghanistan lives in fear of violence. While our grieving neighbour in Haiti looks for food and water.

If we fail them, we fail you. And we dishonour your purpose for us.
In silence we bring our shortcomings to you.

HYMN 300: Eternal Spirit of the Living Christ

The gospel message is clear. That in God there is new life. The past is behind us and so we can move on. In Christ ours is the sunlight, ours is the morning, born of the one light, Eden saw play. So let us praise God's re-creation of the new day and affirm the opportunity we have to be fully part of it as God intends not only for each one of us but also for our togetherness in this church community as I say:

Grace renews us and so we go forward

And we all say: We go forward in life with Jesus Christ. Amen

Family time

Symbols: a cross, a plus sign, an x, a multiplication sign, an equals sign.

There are **lots of symbols on the front cover** of the order of worship this morning. The one at the top is the "alpha" and the one at the bottom the "omega"; letters of the greek alphabet referred to in the call to worship, symbolising the all encompassing and omnipresent nature of God; the first and the last, always with us, in everything.

Who remembers being a parrot in school, learning the times tables? I remember them **all posted up on the wall** for us to look at and we learned them, like parrots, until we had them by heart. **Repeating things like a parrot** was the way we learned things.

Of course this way you remember things but that doesn't mean you understand them – or learn their meaning. It's not the same and sometimes knowing what something means doesn't come until much later. But have you noticed that when you know what something means it becomes alive in a different, special way? I remember one day, realising that with the multiplication tables, multiplying was **just a quick way of adding up**. Suddenly they made sense. Four times two has always been eight. But then I could see it. It was a group of two things and two things and two things and two things. It made sense what I was doing in my head. How I wished I had been told that at the beginning; then I would have understood why I was learning what I was learning.

Sometimes, when you look at things, the meanings and the patterns go deeper. Have a look at the nine times table. First of all, who can fill in the missing answers for me. $5 \times 9 = 45$, $6 \times 9 = 54$. Those two answers are a mirror image of each other 4 and 5, 5 and 4. Have a look at the answers either side: **36 (3 and 6), 63 (6 and 3)**. 27 (2 and 7) 72 (7+2). **A pattern.** Did you see that before? There is another one. Did you know that all the answers of the **nine times table add up to nine**? It's a perfect pattern. It's also true for all multiples of the nine times table. I've had printed the **27 times table** for you as an example and you will see that all the digits in the answers add up to nine as well. This sort of thing was often used in the past to prove the existence of God. **The universe had a beautiful pattern, a harmony, a formula and so it couldn't all be there by chance. Someone must have created it and that creator was God.**

Well it is a nice idea, but then if you were to put out all the other times tables, you would see that this only works for the nine times table. Seeing the wider picture shows you that this doesn't work for the **six, seven or eight times tables – although I'll let you in on a little secret: there is a pattern, a different one, in those tables as well** which you can look for.

We don't have to learn all these tables nowadays: we can all use this: **a calculator**. But calculators don't have all the tables on the little screen on the front; just the answer we ask for. It's a narrow approach and so we lose the chance of appreciating **a wider picture**, perhaps something we haven't seen before.

We all have our favourite passages in the bible, ones we focus on, sometimes quote out of context. And I think that when we do that, we lose the chance of seeing a wider picture. Just concentrate on one of the gospels and we lose the insight of one of the others. Focus on the New Testament and we lose an appreciation of the patterns that are there, enriching the text, emerging from the Old Testament.

So calculators and short quotations, sound bites get us the specific answer we are seeking, but don't enable us to explore and discover something else that has been there all the time for us to see, if only we took in the wider picture, the bigger pattern, got a fuller understanding, whether it is numbers – or scripture, or even actually of our own lives and our understanding of life itself.

Let's have a prayer:

Thank you God that there is always something more in what we have in the created world around us to see and understand. Help us to open our minds (a gift from you) and appreciate the wider world (another gift from you), so we can see new ways of seeing you and finding you, the one who is at the heart of all that was, is and shall be. Amen.

Junior church gathers

PSALM 19

First comment

You have probably guessed by now that I am going to tease out a few insights or patterns from, and maybe put for you a wider perspective on our lectionary readings for this morning. There may be something you have seen before but tying them all together, there may also be something new. **We start with the Psalms.** Psalm 19 which we have just read is a song of praise to God's glory in creation and picks up the joy of our first hymn: Morning has broken, catching glimpses of the divine in the created world of nature and the elements. And this is, in some ways, a good starting point, not because it is primitive, though you may find it as such, but because we should begin with the wonder of God in creation, recognising that we are only a part of creation and whether you hold to a literal interpretation of Genesis or favour a more evolutionary viewpoint, either way nature comes first, before humankind. **And notice the hint of a riddle: in verse three: "no speech or words are used, no sound is heard, yet the message goes out to all the world and is heard to the ends of the earth". How can this be:** how can there be a message or sounds when all is silent or there are no words?

And yet if you have stood on a hilltop and watched the glory of a morning sunrise, you know the beauty and the hope that it communicates and if you have walked, as I like to do, the Rest Bay cliffs at Porthcawl in a gale, the sea will not have failed to have spoken to you about its fearsome strength and its might. A picture, it is said, can paint a thousand words. And for thousands of years paintings have served as a source of spiritual inspiration: without words. In the beginning was the word and the word was God. And the spirit and breath of God moved over the waters, breathing life into creation. And though there are sometimes no actual words, who can at times fail to be touched by the alpha and the omega in the wordless creation that is all around us.

So we begin with the wordless.

We will have our old testament reading now which is from Nehemiah. What we know as the two books of Ezra and Nehemiah in our Christian tradition form one single book in the Hebrew bible and are concerned with the return of the exiles, beginning around 538 BCE and the rebuilding of the temple and Jerusalem itself. It marks a time of national and religious rebirth and reconstruction of the community. The passage that we are going to hear is the moment of the reading and implementation of the Torah (the Law of Moses, or as we know them, the first five books of the bible) around 444 or 443 BCE

FIRST READING: Nehemiah 8: 1-10

Second comment

So let's move on from creation at large, to humankind and more specifically to our spiritual legacy. Nehemiah. It's the seventh month; September/October - the designated beginning of the **new** year in later Judaism. This is a momentous event, the culmination of the reconstruction when the people gather and summon out Ezra for the reading of the Torah; the time when the written Law of Moses is publicly introduced as a complete work, almost certainly for the first time in its re-written and re-worked version and receives communal sanction.

I wonder if you were reminded, while hearing this story of the reading of the law, of the story of Moses imparting the ten commandments to the Israelites. If you were you are on the right track, for this reading picks up and echoes the impact of that past event, but notice there are some differences; a progression.

For here it is the people who summon the Torah, because they want to hear it. They stand, as we stand for our call to worship (have you ever wondered where that tradition took its inspiration from?) And do you notice that it is read out to the men AND the women – all those who could understand. We often say that scripture is for reading out loud and listening to and here is a fine precedent. And apologies for including in the reading all those names of Ezra's assistants. My bible tells me in its footnote that these named assistants include laity as well as the priestly Levites; this is all very democratic then, for all are therefore involved in the study of scripture - and it was explained and clarified, so that all the people could understand it.

So here is The Word, previously wordless, made into words. The ten commandments have been added to and incorporated into five whole books (it must have taken a long time to read!) and here is the transformation and transition, therefore, of God's people into "the people of the Book". But it is a book for all, and one that needs interpretation and understanding to make it accessible and received by all.

And note that the people are overwhelmed by hearing the whole story of their ancestors' journey with God which has brought them to this place in time. And Ezra and Nehemiah emphasise that scripture, this wider picture, is ultimately to be a source of joy.

The people of the book. The word made into words. A source of joy.

So let us too reflect that joy in our singing of our next hymn.

HYMN 72: Now thank we all our God

NEXT READING: 1 Corinthians 12 12-31a

Third comment

There is a link between this reading and the Nehemiah reading which is actually found in the fourth lectionary reading listed for today. In Luke Chapter 4 Jesus stands up in the synagogue to read the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has chosen me to bring good news... and announce the time has come when the Lord will save his people." And Jesus adds "This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read".

For Jesus is the Word made flesh. Jesus is the fulfilment of the law. He is the fullness of compassion which completes the law.

For he is the one who says: you have heard it is written that... but I tell you this.....
He is the one who breaks the rules and works on the Sabbath, because his father is always working
He is the one who puts people before rules, because of love.

Paul underlines the relevance of this transition when he tells us in his letter to the Romans (6:14) that we no longer live under the law but under God's grace. For by the time we reach this passage from Corinthians our spiritual ancestors are seen no longer as a people of the book, as in the time of Ezra and of Nehemiah, but are now a people of the word made flesh.

And so this is the final piece of the pattern for today: Paul represents to us our place in the scheme of things – we, as a people of the word made flesh, each contribute to the ongoing mission of the body of Christ. Note that each contribution is unique and wonderful – because we are human, unique and wonderfully human, because God has made us that way.

And actually this is not unlike our multiplication tables where we started this morning where every number is unique and has its part to play in the greater scheme of things. If each of us were a multiplication table I wonder which one we would most resemble? Are you a slow and careful plodder perhaps, like the two times table. Slow and steady, getting there eventually. Or are you a big, brash individual like the twelve times table, taking life in great leaps and bounds. Perhaps you are like the nine times table: rhythmical, everything in an easily visible, ordered state, everything making sense, or are you more like the 19 times table; not that familiar, harder to read and work out? Whatever you are, you have a part to play and though we are all different, the reality is, like the times tables, we are all composed of the same numbers, just put together in a different order.

We began with the wordless. Then we came to the fixed, written word. Then to word come alive, made flesh.

Time has beaten us this morning. I just want to leave you with a thought. You might care to reflect upon those ideas, those tenets, those codes of conduct, those philosophies, those important things in your own life which have helped form you and make you who you are. How often do they first come to us as tangible, but wordless concepts, only to later solidify, as we find the words to describe them. And how often do they stay heavy, wordy almost dogmatic in their expression, until contact with the human experience lifts, fulfils and transforms them; literally fleshing them out into fuller meaning, purpose and relevance.

Perhaps this is a glimpse of the divine pattern that is part of all that we do and all that we can become. Its cement of course is the living breathing heart of compassion which holds us together as the body of Christ.

So we continue this God-given togetherness, aware of our heritage, but aware too of our own unique contribution to the evolving pattern, journeying forward, confidently and joyfully as the people of the word made flesh, the body of Christ, the Living Lord.

HYMN: 373 Lord Jesus Christ