

MINISTRY RESOURCES FOR SUNDAY 27 DECEMBER 2020

Note: In the congregation for which this material was prepared, a member of the congregation leads Prayers of the People, so there is no prayer of that genre in these resources on this occasion.

1 Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Psalm 148

Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD from the heavens;

praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels;

praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon;

praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens,

and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever;

he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth,

you sea monsters and all deeps,

fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,

fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,

princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike,

old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the LORD,

for his name alone is exalted;

his glory is above earth and heaven.

He has raised up a horn for his people,

praise for all his faithful,

for the people of Israel who are close to him.

Praise the LORD!

We confess before you and each other

that we are unworthy of the gift of the child who was born into this world.

We are lost in our sinfulness,

obsessed with ourselves and the worlds we have constructed for ourselves.

We habitually sin in thought, word and deed,

and by our many acts of omission.

The innocence of the newborn child

reminds us of just how inured we are in our sinful ways,

and we come before you in shame to seek your forgiveness and grace.

For the tiny child is also the Risen One,

the saviour who died that we might live,

and so we come in his name.

Amen

2 **Declaration of Forgiveness**

God so loved the world

that he sent his only son as an innocent child,
as a newborn babe.

God did not send his son into the world to judge the world as it deserved;
the child came to save the world,
for the child is the gift of God's inexplicable and unquenchable love.

In Jesus Christ, the innocent newborn,
in Jesus Christ, the victorious risen one,
our sins are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

3 **Bible Readings –**

Luke 2:22-40

Galatians 4:4-7

4 **Sermon:** See below

5 **Blessing and Dismissal**

*So you are no longer a slave but a child,
and if a child then also an heir, through God.*

Go as God's people to love and serve the Lord.

And speak the word of salvation to all who will listen,
for salvation is the family business.

The grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ,
the love of God,

and the companionship of the Holy Spirit,

be with you as you go,

and remain with you evermore.

Amen

SERMON

They say there's a thing called "Christmas letdown". After all the hype, and the days (or weeks) of preparations and anticipation, suddenly, in the space of just one day, it's all over. The tree sits rather forlornly now, no longer the custodian of mysterious packages, and the only real reminder of the day that was, are the meals of Christmas leftovers. The world at large has moved onto its next extravaganza, the post-Christmas sales, and then it will be New Year's Eve and fireworks and partying and mayhem. Socially distanced mayhem that is, of course. It's easy to feel deflated after Christmas, and here we are, just two days on from the big day, gathered for worship. I wonder if you're feeling a tad deflated today. Are you, perhaps, just going through the motions?

The other way of thinking about the Christmas that's just passed, though, is to let it sit with us in the days that follow, and allow its message to sink in. We have turned Christmas into such a jamboree that, in the midst of the family and the feasting and the fun, the significance of the day can all too easily pass us by. We can hear the familiar stories, and allow their familiarity to rob them of their power. Christmas can, very easily, just become a sentimental blur. So in the days that follow, perhaps we can untangle the trivia, and reflect on the truths that the day conveys. We can rejoice that, today, the Lectionary writers have offered us a short passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians. Although the notion of Christmas as a festival was unknown to Paul, and he appears to have known nothing of the nativity narratives which we so cherish, he was very much aware of the immense significance of the Incarnation event which both commemorate. Our passage might be short, but there's a heck of a lot in it for our encouragement!

Actually the four verses we have are part of a much longer discussion in Galatians about the Law and about sin. The argument's complicated, but we don't need to go into all the details to understand today's passage. In brief, what had been happening in Galatia was this. Paul had preached to the Gentiles there that they were in no way bound by the Jewish Law.

But after he'd left, Paul's opponents had preached the opposite, and at least some of the Galatians had started to keep the Law. So Paul remonstrates with them, and is at pains to explain that the Law is not about salvation, but about imprisonment. He argues that the Jews have been held in bondage by the Law. All the Law could do was define perfection, and crystalise just how far short of that perfection those who tried to obey it fell. So trying to do the impossible, to try to meet all the requirements of the Law, could only reinforce sinfulness.

That was the situation which had prevailed for generations, Paul says; and in the same way, the Gentiles had been imprisoned by their sins. The Law and sin were the two forces which had kept all humanity in utter bondage. All humanity was enslaved to the Law and to sin.

And then, after that long argument, comes our passage from chapter 4. Then comes the good news of the Incarnation. Then comes the cosmic significance of the Christ event. Then comes the news that *God acted* to free those who were enslaved.

But, writes Paul, when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.

God sent his Son. Of course *we* understand the Son to be one of the persons of the Trinity, literally God himself. That gives an even richer understanding, but the point is that God sent the One who was fully divine to be born fully human – born of a woman, as all humans are, and to be subject to the same Law which had enslaved humankind. God's purpose in this sacrificial act was none other than to redeem those who were under the Law.

We glibly use that word “redeem” in the Church, but do we stop to think what it actually means? The dictionary says that “redeem” means “to buy or pay off, to clear a debt.” Remember, we are talking here about people whom Paul has described as slaves. Slavery was pervasive in the ancient world; Paul’s readers knew what it meant to redeem a slave. Some of them, no doubt, were or had been slaves. Some will have owned slaves.

So they all knew that to redeem a slave meant, quite literally, to pay the price to buy the slave back, so he or she could be set free.

What Paul is saying is that God sent his Son to pay the price, so that all those enslaved by the Law and by sin could be set free! It’s an incredible claim, but the next bit is even more incredible. Not only will the slaves be set free, but they are to be adopted as God’s children, literally, as children of God.

This is the same thought that’s expressed in the Prologue to John’s gospel, which you have probably read over the Christmas period.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

What does it mean to be a daughter of God or a son of God? We’ve already referred to one Son of God – Jesus Christ. To be a child of God makes those who believe, literally, sisters and brothers of Christ. *Literally*, sisters and brothers of Christ. Members of the divine family. That’s amazing enough, but Paul goes on to explain a bit more of what it actually means.

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

As members of the family, as the sisters and brothers of Christ, we have the privilege of addressing God as “Abba. Father”. We’re sometimes told that the Aramaic word “Abba” means “Daddy”, but it doesn’t, because it’s not a childish word. It *is* a familiar term that would be used in the family, though, for example by an adult son addressing his father. It is familiar, but it’s still respectful. It’s not at all like the very formal way in which God is referred to as “Father” in the Old Testament. So we are invited into a warm, familial relationship with God himself! Slaves have masters; we are no longer slaves but children, members of the family, God’s children. Not only that, but because we are children of the family, we are also heirs. That doesn’t mean heirs to some great property portfolio, or some worldly wealth or legacy. We are heirs in the sense that we have the rights and privileges of being God’s children. We are not God’s slaves, or anybody else’s slaves; we are God’s sons, daughters and heirs!

These are extraordinary privileges which Paul proclaims. It’s hardly surprising that, earlier in the letter, when he’s reprimanding the Galatians for embracing the Jewish Law, he remonstrates, “You foolish Galatians.” Why would they wish to return to the tyranny of the Law? Have they not understood the great gift that has been given to them in Christ?

I wonder if Paul would remonstrate with us in the same way. You foolish people of the 21st century! Because we do so often reduce our Christian faith to so much less than it is. We’re sometimes guilty of limiting Jesus to just a wise man and good teacher. At times we turn Christianity into a social movement, just another agency to address the ills of our society. We stumble over the fact of the resurrection, and find ourselves in the corner of the sceptics, to whom the very notion of resurrection is no more than nonsense.

We turn the stories of God's interacting with his world into children's tales, full of sentimentalism, but robbed of their power and wonder. What have we done to our faith? Why do we wonder that the Christian message no longer seems to resonate with a world that so desperately needs to hear it?

Our short passage from Galatians today should make us sit up sharply. Christmas for the world has become a festival of over-indulgence and schmaltzy sentimentality. Even for us in the Church, we prefer to concentrate on the romance of the child in the manger, with the lowing cattle, the visiting shepherds, and the exotic wise men. We've turned Christmas into another children's story; we're content with a Christmas that's a nativity play. Now, two days after Christmas, Paul pulls us up abruptly.

In the fullness of time, Paul declares, *God acted*. At a particular moment, God sent his Son into the world. From that day hence, the world could never be the same again. The birth which we commemorated two days ago was the birth of more than a child; it was the birth of a new era in the history of women and men. Because *God acted*.

In the week that is to come, many of us will make New Year's resolutions. We'll resolve that we will do things differently in the months ahead. There's nothing wrong with that, of course, but Christmas is not about what we have done, or about what we must do. Christmas declares that none of that matters. Christmas is about what God has done for us. That's the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ that is so often lost, yet that is the power of the gospel. All that is asked of us, all that is asked of all humanity, is that we believe. Because *God acted*.

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Thanks be to God for the message of the coming of the Christ child. For in it is the salvation of all who will believe in the name of Jesus.

Amen