**Sunday 2 July 2017 Pentecost 4**

***Prayer before Worship:***

*Holy Friend, please infiltrate our lives with your Holy Spirit, that we may possess the courage to pick up the cross of discipleship and carry it as a high honour. Make us ashamed of nothing except our own sin, and afraid of nothing except the temptation to turn aside for an easier, downhill path. Make us ready to pay the price of faithfulness, to the glory of Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.*

**Welcome**

**Call to Worship:**

The smallest thing, under the influence of God,

is made infinitely precious and eternal.

If we come to worship focussing on our needs,

***we will go away feeling let down.***

If we come wanting a God made in our own likeness,

***we will be disappointed.***

If we come rigid in our ideas and set in our ways,

***we will leave as barren as we arrived.***

If we put God first,

***we shall never worship in vain.***

Listen to this, you people of God:

The Lord you God is One, and you shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength.

***Let us worship God***

**Songs of Praise:** I will give thanks to Thee

Lift up your heads, O Ye gates

You shall go out with joy

**Opening Prayer**

Awesome Friend, we tum away from any preoccupation with our own thoughts, prejudices and wants and we turn to You.  That is not always easy Lord in this place we live in where we are often told we are the most important thing... Please help us to cast aside our self centredness and find our true centre in you. Bring us to that point where we let go of all that is tatty or second rate and launch out into sincere and joyful praise, Amen.

**Notices**

**Birthday Basket**

**Offering and Dedication**

Nurturing God, You welcome all people and we are so grateful that you compassionately offer fullness of life to all.  And so this morning we bring to you our offerings, knowing that what we give is important –for it reminds us of how we determine the priorities in our lives... so here it is, the money and food we choose to give to the building of your kingdom here in this place and beyond, and also our talents, our prayers, our very presence in the community... we give them to you. May you bless what we offer so that they may be used wisely, in Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

**God @ Work** Stuart Mackie

**Time with the children** Welcoming in and sending out

we welcome because we have been welcomes –use piece of craft foam, scissors and a vivid –cut a door/flap in the foam and write inside on one side and outside on the other... Get the kids to hold the door part, you hold top and bottom of frame –fold it in on itself, turn it inside out, so now you are on the inside... !! It is amazing, the way God welcomes us in –we don’t really do anything –God does it... and it also happens in the opposite way –we are sent out -

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Song:**  Will you come and follow me

***Children leave for Young Church programme***

**Powerpoint Reflection** Psalm 13

Here we take some time to join with David, and sit with the questions that come and go... questions about why God seems present in some moments and distant at others. Questions that remain, amidst our decision to trust in God’s unfailing love.

**Bible Reading:** Romans 6: 12-23

**Prayer of Confession**

It is not easy being a Christian –we keep messing up... and so we have this regular space in which we can start to put things right, for now is the time for confession. Let us pray.

Regretfully but sincerely, loving God, we confess that we don’t often live in the style of Jesus; too readily we adjust to the values and attitudes of the rest of the community; sometimes there is nothing distinctive about us.

Regretfully, loving God, we confess that we do not make the most of our faith;

In the times we have to ourselves in this busy life, we do not make space for reflection and prayer; we leave you at the edges instead of embracing your at the centre of our days.

Regretfully, loving God, we confess that we have looked for you in remarkable people and spectacular events; yet we have ignored you in the ordinary circumstances, in ordinary friends and neighbours, and in ordinary church members.

Regretfully, loving God, we confess that we have not been very fair to ourselves;

We have hidden our gifts behind false modesty, withheld strengths lest others expect a lot from us, and been too afraid that our faith may be mocked if expressed openly.

And so loving God, we unfold our lives before you.

Please forgive and expunge the things that are sloppy, unloving or rotten.

Please mend the things that are torn or distorted or fractured.

Please rehabilitate that soul-image of yourself that exists in each of us,

and give us the desire and the will and the strength to make a good effort of living by faith in this new week. In the name of Christ Jesus our Saviour, we pray, Amen.

**Assurance of Forgiveness**

In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, I ask you to accept God’s saving love, putting your sins and mistakes behind you, and letting go of regrets and fears. Now face the future with the measured optimism of those who know they are destined to ultimate victory. By saving love you are released; you are at liberty! Thanks be to God!

**Song:** Father, I thank you

**Bible Reading:** Genesis 22: 1- 14 Matthew 10: 34-42

**Sermon** Be our guest! Costly presence

**Song:** Where the road runs out

**Prayers of Intercession**

Most loving God, you have put it in our hearts to pray for one another.

Please hear our prayers, correct their errors, and bless all that is wise and loving.

We pray for the young and the strong, and all who are full of joy and high hopes today and we pray for the elderly and the weak, and all who are utterly weary and disheartened today.

We pray for the wise and the generous, and those who are looking for new challenges today... and we pray for the foolish and the selfish, and those who evading their responsibilities today.

We pray for peace-keepers and peacemakers, and all who work for justice and peace today... and we pray for the hostile and the treacherous, and all who will resort to violence today.

We pray for the well housed and well fed, and those who share their good fortune today... and we pray for the homeless and the hungry, and all whose plight is ignored today.

We pray for the patient and the merciful, and all who will make new friends today... and we pray for the hasty and the judgmental, and all who will create some misery today.

We pray for the healthy and the buoyant, and those who will share much happiness today... and we pray for the dying and the sad, and those who will weep inconsolably today.

We pray for the faithful and the loving, and all who will worship with delight today...

and we pray for the faithless and the cynical, and all who will find life a drag today.

Loving God, we pray for our loved ones and our friends, and those whom we will meet casually today... and we pray for strangers and enemies, and those who will think evil of us today. Lord, please bring the day nearer when our prayers and our deeds will work in perfect harmony, and we will be a blessing to all those whose lives touch ours. Through Christ Jesus our Saviour, Amen.

**Hymn:**  First set your mind

**Communion**   
The Lord our God be with you.  
***And also with you.***Lift up your hearts.  
***We lift not only our hearts, but our souls and our minds to God.***Let us give thanks to God.  
***It is right to give God our thanks and praise.***It is right that we give you our thanks and praise, O God,  
creator of heaven and earth.   
You brought our world into being  
and formed male and female in your image,  
breathing into them the breath of life.  
You blessed them with descendants

as numerous as the stars.  
When they became slaves in Egypt,  
you rescued them and led them to a land of promise,  
where you challenged them to serve you alone.   
When they failed to keep their covenant promises  
you spoke through the prophets  
and the call to serve you alone in word and deed  
resounded again throughout the land.  
When their words went unheeded,  
you broke into our history in the person of Jesus Christ  
who showed that serving you meant serving others  
with love, humility, and compassion  
Through his death and resurrection  
we have been empowered  
to serve as he served and to love as he loved.

And so, with all the company of heaven and earth we praise  
your holy name saying:  
***Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of  power and might,  
          heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
          Hosanna in the highest.  
          Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.  
          Hosanna in the highest.***Holy are you O God, and blessed is your Son, Jesus Christ  
who revealed the true meaning of servanthood,  
when he washed his disciples’ feet before sitting down at a table to share the meal with them.  
On that night - the night of his betrayal - he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,  
“This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”  
In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying,  
“This is my blood of the new covenant, poured out for you  and for everyone.  Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”  
For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,  
you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.  
Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, O God, and upon these gifts of bread and wine, that they may be for us the life of Christ and that we may make that life visible through the way we love and serve you and one another.  
In Jesus’ name we pray the prayer Jesus taught… Our Father in heaven… Amen  
  
The bread we break and the cup we now take are a sharing in the life of Christ.  
**The gifts of God for the people of God.**  
   
**Distribution**

**Prayer**   
Gracious God, we give you thanks for satisfying our hungry hearts with this holy meal shared in the Spirit with Jesus, your Son, our Lord.    
Strengthened and refreshed, we go from here to continue his work in the world through our faithful witness and loving service. This we pray through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

**Hymn :** God who sets us on a journey

**Benediction and sung Amen**

Go out with the Gospel ringing in your ears

with joy flooding your heart

a spring energising your step

and with love flowing through your hands.

And may the Lover of the universe uphold you,

the Saviour of the lost enfold you,

and the Spirit of truth mould you,

now and evermore, Amen.

**Sermon**

This week was complicated –I looked at the passages from the lectionary and had both the Old and New Testament texts leap out at me... not because they were simple, but probably because they were difficult.

And I kept thinking there must be a thread that will weave the two together... but by Saturday morning I still seemed to have two separate sermons...

The first sermon went like this...

So here we are back in Genesis with another really difficult story... a story that has often been used as a way to challenge Christians with regard to the importance of our faith in life. We ask ourselves, would I be willing to put my beloved child before my God if that is asked of me?

Or at least that seems to be how we read it... if we simply read this as a story of a man who was reluctant, yet willing, to offer up a human sacrifice to his god, with his precious vulnerable young son as the unsuspecting victim. If we read about Abraham who took Isaac up a mountain and there bound him and placed him on an altar.

But when I read it like this, I end up with huge issues –as I suspect you do too –both emotionally and intellectually. We seem to be back in the territory of children at risk –and I immediately want to challenge Abraham –how dare he do this to his child?

The ram caught in the scrub that God provides for Abraham to offer instead didn’t really solve the issues for me. This story, too often read in this way simply leads to nightmares. Would a loving God really ask someone to kill his beloved child to prove their faith? The whole idea of human sacrifice is appallingly awful.

So how might we read it differently, but with integrity for the text?

I guess we start with a recognition of the context.

That this is set in a time when human sacrifice was not seen as repugnant. In 2 Kings we read of child sacrifice as a normal part of religious observance. This was set in a time of the very early developing faith of the Hebrew people and that is the context where God is leading his people from. The Jews were learning that God does not require the sacrifice of children as they had previously assumed.

God enters our often foolish ways and turns them on their heads –for there is never a time in the story in which God intends Isaac to be killed. Maybe there are still areas in our common living that God finds repugnant... but God works with us, drawing us on to a new awareness and a new place –stretching our faith as we go. Learning how to trust God and put God first –absolutely, in our lives.

And another aspect of context is the line at the start of the text that says- “After these things...” –that is no throw away line –it is a reminder of what has already happened in the story –that God had promised and fulfilled the birth of Isaac after the whole awful Ishmael situation. That Abraham had already lost one son –emphasised again by God’s words –go and take your **only** son... whom you love... And that leads me to another place completely.

And so I have to go back to the text and relook at the story.

I want you to take a moment now to turn to your neighbour and share with each other how old you picture Abraham in this story –when you play it out in your head –how does he look?

And now do the same with regard to Isaac in the story... how old is he?

What did you come up with? ...

Nothing in text specifically gives the age of Isaac... but we see he was old enough to worship with his dad... and old enough to carry the wood for the fire, and old enough to think through the reality that they didn’t have an animal to sacrifice... and what that might mean...

And Abraham... he must have been really, really old by now.

The story can look very different if you imagine these ages in different ways...

If you saw a really young vulnerable child –say a 4 year old -and a still strong older Abraham, the story becomes one of Abraham’s willingness to kill a vulnerable child

**But** if it is actually a young strapping pre teen, and Abraham is really old and vulnerable... that makes it quite a different story... Now it becomes a story about Isaac’s willingness to be bound by his Father when he could easily overpower his father.

And it’s interesting, Islam identifies with Abraham’s obedience.

Judaism however, refers to Isaac’s willingness to carry the wood and so on.

It is interesting- when you look at the text, you don’t get any idea of what is going on in Abraham’s mind... what is he thinking?

Because the emphasis is not on what he is thinking, the emphasis is on him as the Father –both of Isaac –and, through the meaning of his name, the father of many.

Christianity actually calls us beyond the simple obedience motif, to link Isaac with Jesus and the incarnation... we are called to recognise this willingness to let his son die, and the willingness of the son to die in order that everyone can see the way God provides.

Then we start to grasp that for us as Christians we are given the Old Testament as the texts that foreshadow the coming of Jesus. The Old Testament stories no longer stand on their own. We read them in the light of the New Testament; in light of the Gospel; in light of the incarnation.

In the incarnation, we see Jesus putting God first –absolutely first. We saw it last week in those challenging words about putting God before family; and today in the words about losing one’s life for God. For Jesus, the shift is from putting the life of someone we love on the altar, to putting ourselves on the altar.

Isaac points us to Jesus in a profound way. Are we willing to risk our own life, to be bound, in order for others to learn that fullness of life is found in Jesus? And is it in that willingness, that we discover abundant life ourselves.

And then there is this other sermon that goes like this...

Welcome. It's such a common word –we write it on doormats and signs. We hear it at restaurants and theme parks. It is a word we hear and see often. Which can mean we lose sight of its importance. The word comes from compounding two words –well and come.

The root of well involves the aspect of wellness or wellbeing, but it also can involve the idea of pleasure or blessing. And come involves the idea of arriving or being received. So welcome involves an invitation to come and be well. Making someone welcome involves more than a sentence spoken. It is rooted in the ancient art of hospitality. It takes thought, intention, and discipline to make someone feel at home.

Overcoming the fear of the stranger to welcome them, letting hospitality be more important than risk. This practice of welcome doesn’t just happen, it is taught. And such lessons don’t come so easily in our society.

But in the Greek, the word for stranger –xenos – is also the word for guest and host. We understand all too well xenophobia –fear of the stranger... and yet Jesus calls us to xenophilia –love of the stranger –who is also the guest, and who is also the host.

Hospitality in New Testament times was seen differently from today.

That is why Jesus flits between the idea of welcome and hospitality and the idea of going into the homes of others as guest so interchangeably –they are woven together.

Whereas we in our understanding, make a huge differentiation between host and guest... When we have a Guess who’s coming for dinner at church we have 2 lists –guest and host –and we assume that the host will take the primary responsibility in the relationship.

We would never mix up the terms... never have the same word for both... and it blows me away to think of the two –host and guest - in the same way.

Having just led a Brownie camp recently on the theme of Beauty and the Beast, that whole idea of guest and host are very clear in my mind.

When Belle enters the old castle for the first time and finds it such a strange place, Lumiere and then Mrs Potts and Chip, and then Cogsworth make every effort to make her feel welcome –the whole song Be our Guest, celebrates this ability to make someone move from stranger to friend by the gift of hospitality.

Hospitality and welcome is central to the practice of Christianity - So how do we teach hospitality?

It all begins with practice: to offer hospitality, we simply bring who we are, what we have, where we are. Whether what we bring is grand or mediocre, we need to practice the gesture, for that is what shapes us. It is what we learn from –whether it is difficult and complicated or straight forward and enjoyable.

And what stands out for me is that we are called to view hospitality not just as a come to my space and I will make it comfortable for you –but entering the space of others, and learning to feel comfortable there too. And I suspect that is much more difficult –it is for me anyway –for when we enter other spaces, we lose control. We instead, lift up our cross. We pay attention to the other –setting aside our own discomfort at times, to meet them where they are. –even if we never actually feel truly at home in those other places. But we will learn the culture of others and discover the privilege of being a guest. We will grapple with different tastes –more than just of the mouth. And as we do that, the world will not be so quick to confuse our faith with our culture. When we choose the way of vulnerability, the way of giving up power –the way of the cross, we will not only change the community around us, but we will be changed.

Taking up a cross and following Jesus... is very different from the power-retaining self assertive emphasis we have in our society where we are taught that caring for ourselves is most important –ensuring our own comfort first that we can then share with others if there is some left over.

If we try to find fulfilment by saving our own lives; if we try to find our true selves by ensuring our own comfort first, then we are doomed to failure.

Taking up a cross involves entering other spaces where we are not comfortable, to choose the way of the powerless, in order that others may be blessed.

...So there are the two brief sermons –and it wasn’t until both were written that I did indeed discover the thread woven between the two –I wonder if you have... for me it is the thread of incarnation –the thread that chooses the way of powerlessness in order to bring life in all its abundance.

The incarnation that Isaac points to involved Jesus giving up his own sense of power, trusting God to do the right thing –the good thing... and becoming the guest in this world. Humanity hosted him and he was not always comfortable with our welcome. And now we are also called to be the guest... in a way that weaves the welcome of what we understand as host, into the way we enter the lives of others.

So be it, Amen.