The Swiss Church in London

Audio service, 1 November 2020 – Reformation Sunday

**Welcome (by Carla)**

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. (Galatians 5:1.6)”

“C'est pour la liberté que Christ nous a affranchis. Tenez donc ferme dans cette liberté et ne vous placez pas de nouveau sous la contrainte d’un esclavage. Seulement la foi agit à travers l'amour.“

„So steht nun fest in der Freiheit, zu der uns Christus befreit hat, und lasst euch nicht wieder in ein Joch der Knechtschaft spannen! Was zählt, ist der Glaube, der durch die Liebe wirksam ist.“

Welcome to the audio service of the Swiss Church in London!

No matter where in the world you are, in Britain, Switzerland, or elsewhere, it’s a pleasure to have you with us as we worship together from our homes. If you have a candle at home, I invite you to light it now and pray for someone who needs your good thoughts today. And if you have a smart phone, why don’t you take a picture of the candle and send it to the person you are keeping in your prayers. It can make all the difference to someone’s day to know that they are not forgotten!

Today is reformation Sunday and I have invited people from different protestant denominations to send in prayers and readings. You will hear new voices and also some familiar voices leading through today’s service.

As we mark this day together, let us be grateful that we as a congregation have overcome the separating boundaries of church denominations, and that Roman-Catholics, Protestants, people from other faith traditions or none can come before God together in friendship. Looking back in history, this is a true achievement, and one to be cherished and nurtured.

**Opening Prayer (by Meret)**

Living God

We are celebrating the reformation day. We thank you that you are still at work in the life of the church, reforming and reshaping us and remaking us into your image. One of the ways how we reflect your image are the ways we care for one another with love and prayer. We pray for those who are sick, those who are grieving and those who are affected by the coronavirus all around the world.

There is a lot of uncertainty around us, but you tell us over and over again not to be afraid. Help us to remember that you are a God who never sleeps, a God on whom we can depend in every situation. When we feel lost and alone, teach us that you are there. When we feel overwhelmed by trouble, unsure of our ability to get through, help us to remember that you are close by. When we are fearful of what the future may hold, teach us that you are watching over us. Help us to understand that whatever we may face you will guide and guard.

And so we pray that you are close to us now, in London, in Switzerland and everywhere in the world. Lead and guide us all.

Amen

**Reading Jeremiah 18:1-8 (read in French by Stephane)**

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

Then the word of the Lord came to me: Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.

**Reading 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8 (read by Colin)**

You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition. For our appeal does not spring from deceit or impure motives or trickery, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the message of the gospel, even so we speak, not to please mortals, but to please God who tests our hearts. As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

**Sermon (by Carla)**

*What will the others say?*

What will people say? What will people think of me? That’s a question we probably all ask ourselves from time to time, consciously or unconsciously. People’s opinions about us do affect us, whether we want it or not.

Why is that?

The British author Zadie Smith wrote in her book Intimations, a collection of essays that she wrote in the early stages of lockdown: “Without love, life is just ‘doing time’. Without that element present, in some form, somewhere in our lives, there really is only time, and there will always be too much of it. Even if you don’t have a minute to spare – still all of that time, without love, will feel empty and endless.”

The purpose of life is to feel loved and recognised and to belong. Without a sense of belonging, life is very lonely and is reduced to filling the time between our first breathe and our last. This longing for love makes us vulnerable because we become dependent from others. And so we talk, dress and behave in certain ways to please others and find recognition.

Yet it can be exhausting to wanting to please others, and we have probably all been at that point when we said to ourselves: I don’t care what others think! But deep down we do, at least most of us. This creates a dilemma. On one hand we want to be recognised by others, on the other hand we want to be free from people’s opinions about us, be they good or bad.

Christianity, and particularly Protestant Christianity, has a straightforward answer for that dilemma: our justification comes from God and God alone. God knew us and loved us, even before we were born. We don’t have to find justification in others, or within ourselves (which is often even harder!). God approves of us, and nothing can undo this approval. “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts”, Paul says to the early Christians in Thessalonica.

Yet every good bargain has two ends, and that’s true for God’s approval of us too. God can only approve of us if we believe and trust that there is a God who does approve of us. If we don’t believe in God, then how can we believe in God’s loving and unconditional love? But to have faith is complicated. There are days when we find it easy to believe in God’s care for us humans, and then there are days when we seriously doubt any kind of purpose in this wide mysterious universe.

*At the potter’s shop*

But let’s leave behind our doubts for now and think about God. It seems God has hobbies. Did you know that? He seems to have a particular fascination for pottery. It is a beautiful craft after all! God finds potter shops so inspiring, that he once sent Prophet Jeremiah to the local potter to observe him shaping his ceramics. “Go down to the potter’s house”, he said to Jeremiah, “and there I will give you my message.” So Jeremiah went, and he saw the potter work on his wheel. Every now and then, a creation was flawed, and Jeremiah saw the potter squashing and reshaping the clay into something new. After Jeremiah had observed the potter for a while, God gave him the message: “My people are like clay in my hand”, God said. “If you repent from your evil intentions, then I will not destroy you, but shape you into a more beautiful object.”

We often act in a way that hurts God’s creation. That’s what the Bible calls sin. Sometimes we hurt the creation knowingly, because we are stubborn or because it’s more convenient that way. Other times, we are not even aware that we hurt God’s creation, yet just because we didn’t know doesn’t mean that we are not accountable. As an example: Just because we didn’t know that we can’t meet in groups of more than six people currently, doesn’t mean that we can’t legally be held accountable. Such is our accountability in God. It is our task to gain wisdom and to search for the truth. We are responsible for our actions, and we will ultimately be held accountable. To be a human being on this planet trotting along on life’s path means that we sometimes get it wrong, collectively as human beings, or individually through our deliberate actions. That’s when the pottery is flawed. Yet God can reshape us and make us into something more beautiful on his wheel. If we acknowledge our wrongdoing, our sinfulness, and if we keep searching for the truth, then we will become an ever more beautiful vessel in God’s hands.

In God is forgiveness, beauty and acceptance always. God is dynamic, like a potter reshaping his creations. We will mess up and we will bounce back. We will go down the path of evil and we will take a turn for the better. We will be ignorant, and we will gain wisdom. We will be judged by other people, and we will be our own harsh critics, yet we will be accepted by God if we trust and have faith in her dynamic ways.

*What happens on tour stays on tour*

There is this saying in music and sporting circles: “what happens on tour stays on tour”. It is a phrase agreed to by people who travel together for sport events or music shows, in essence meaning that all exploits during the tour must be kept strictly confidential and not be discussed with anyone outside the group.

God tests our hearts, and God alone is our judge and witness. We don’t need to look for praise from other humans. Our relationship with God is some kind of moral compass. God knows. We know. The moment I know and admit my failures and chose to get it right, God will already have forgiven us. That’s when our healing process can begin. We don’t need anyone else’s opinion. What happens on tour stays on tour. It’s between me and God.

This is in essence the message of the reformation that has its roots in 15th century Europe. No one stands between us and God. We don’t need priests to absolve us from our sins. It’s between me and God. My end of the bargain is to put faith in God and trust in his forgiving ways. God’s end of the bargain is to accept us and stay with us and always give us another chance. Our relationship with God is like a dance, sometimes sweeping the dance floor in ultimate grace, then again standing on each other’s feet, stumbling and falling but never let go. The dance with God will build up our confidence in ourselves and ultimately lead us to the most precious gift for us and for the world around us, which is freedom. And only a truly free heart is able to love unconditionally, no matter how we dress or talk or behave. And it’s this kind of love that the world needs.

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

Amen

**Announcements**

We are planning to go ahead with the commemoration service at the Swiss Church on the 22nd of November at 11am, if government guidelines will allow. Please consult our webpage or get in touch with Carla for updated information.

I would like to thank everyone listening to our church services for your generous donations. Each one of your donations has helped the Swiss Church to get through this financially challenging year. You can find all the donation detail on our webpage.

**Prayers of Intercession (by Andy Bernd, Bertjan and Marianne)**

Let us pray. For all the people of the world who suffer abuse, homelessness, racism, hunger, poverty or any man-made prejudice, give them the strength to overcome all obstacles and to create the world God wants for us.

Good God

We pray for all churches and congregations here and around the world. May we appreciate what we have in common and not just see what separates us. Be our centre and the foundation for reconciliation and hope. This we pray in the name of God father, son and holy spirit.

*Kyrie Eleison*

For peace and reconciliation, we pray. For goodwill and cooperation between our nations and our people in these difficult times. For the leaders of the world we pray that they govern with a warm heart and an attentive eye for the most vulnerable. For hope we pray in fearful times. In the name of God mother, son and holy spirit.

*Kyrie Eleison*

We pray you make your face shine upon us during this season - a season we did not expect to find ourselves still in. Yet we know you are faithful and we put our trust in you. We praise you Father.

We lift up the leadership of our church. Give them wisdom and insight on how to proceed during this difficult time. Thank you for their tireless input and concern for our wellbeing. We appreciate we can be part of our church; be that in person or listening to services via the Internet. Protect them all Lord.

We pray for our church congregation, our families, our friends. Pour out your peace over each one of us. Keep us safe, protect us and give each individual insight in what is right to do and not to do during this tier 2 phase. We pray we can draw near to you wherever we are. Come into our frustrations. We ask we can use this different time in a good way and spend time with you. We ask you comfort and bring peace to the ones who are separated from families and friends and feel that gap so greatly. Comfort the ones who mourn. Draw near to them and help them to turn their eyes towards you.

Mir bätä das auäs im Name vom Vater, vom Sohn u vom Heiligä Geischt.

Amen

**The Lord’s Prayer**

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.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

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

now and for ever.

Amen

**Blessing**

The Lord bless you and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

Amen

*Guest participants in this service:*

*Reverend Meret Engel, Swiss Reformed Church*

*Reverend Stephane Desarmais, French Protestant Church in London*

*Colin McIntyre, Church of Scotland*

*Andy Palfreyman, Swiss Church in London*

*Reverend Bernd Rapp, German-Lutheran Church in London*

*Reverend Bertjan de Langemaat, Dutch Church in London*

*Marianna Fisher-Hertig, Swiss Church in London*