

The Swiss Church in London
Audio service, 3 May 2020

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to this audio service from the Swiss Church on Sunday the 3rd of May. I am delighted to welcome a new person to our audio team today, and that is Geoff Fisher whose voice you will hear in one of the readings. Peter Yardley-Jones plays the organ. Marianne Fisher-Hertig, Niccolo Aliano, Colin McIntyre and myself Reverend Carla Maurer, are contributing prayers, thoughts and readings. Wherever you are right now, whether you feel joyful or sad, lonely or connected, fearful or confident, we are branches attached to one vine, rooted in God through Jesus Christ, and connected through the the Holy Spirit that transcends all.

“Be exalted, O God, above the heavens, and let your glory be over all the earth.” (Psalm 108:6)

„Elève-toi au-dessus du ciel, ô Dieu, et que ta gloire soit sur toute la terre!”

„Erhebe dich über die Himmel, o Gott, und über der ganzen Erde sei deine Herrlichkeit!“

Opening Prayer

Living God,
source of forgiveness and self-acceptance,
we praise you for the way you have worked in us.
You have worked through countless generations of believers and you are working still through us, stirring hearts, transforming lives, offering hope.

Amidst the never-ending stream of news,
the talking heads, the glowing screens, the fearmongering headlines
our hearts grow weary, threatening to overwhelm.

Liberate us, O God, as we are listening to this service in our homes,
from our tendency to hoard knowledge and feast upon information as if it is
our daily bread.

Extend us grace to grieve for the broken world you adore.

Turn our attention to what we can see outside the window: the trees still clapping, the birds still flying. Turn our hearts to think of our friends distant and yet united in this very moment.

Grant us wisdom to listen to your word and to discern what you deem true, and right, and noble.

Amen

John 8:31-32; 42-47

Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. [...]If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. Which of you convicts me of sin? If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me? Whoever is from God hears the words of God. The reason you do not hear them is that you are not from God."

Reflection by Niccolo Aliano

Writing sermons at this time is extremely difficult, perhaps because I am locked out of the church. Church means assembly, and we cannot have an assembly. Who am I preaching to? How should I even preach? It's not just that, though. The present condition has awakened in me so many conflicting emotions, some good and some bad, new and old, like sorrow and isolation, hope and new energy, fear and resignation, prayerfulness and mindfulness. But the most unsettling emotion has been uncertainty. And this is probably another reason I find it hard to preach. How will the pandemic end? When will a seemingly normal life return? Church has been such an important part of my life that I'm left wondering, "Where is the Church now?"

From the beginning of isolation, I have returned to this passage from John's Gospel. If we continue in God's word, we are Christ's disciples, and the truth will make us free. What is freedom? There's a prayer in the Anglican Book of

Common Prayer which also says: “O God, whose service is perfect freedom.” Serving God is freedom. Freedom is realizing that we are not sovereign in this world. God is sovereign. We need to step off from our pedestal. We are not the conductors of the world. We live in the world, and we need to tell God’s word in the world. We might be physically away from each other, but the Church is there doing that. How?

In a myriad of ways it tells the truth of God’s word. For some it might be comforting the bereaved, the lonely, and the sad. For others, it means encouraging the understanding of the situation so that the dignity of everybody is defended. And for yet others it means lamenting—lamenting because what we can do is limited and uncertainty prevails, lamenting because sorrow is part of life. But as Christians we believe that this world, with its sorrows, pains, and uncertainties, is not the end of the story. We need to endure them, yes, but there is light, a light brighter than any light at the end of the “lockdown tunnel.” We just need to remember that, though God might seem far away, he is there and still holds our hand, if we keep on living his word. We might not be in our churches at the moment, but God’s Spirit still lives in the Church, and the Church is alive.

As we lament, therefore, I invite you to repeat after me these words from Psalm 31:

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

For thou has redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of truth.

For thou has redeemed me, O Lord, thou God of truth.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit.

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. Amen.

Reading Romans 1:8-13

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to

you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles.

Reflection by Carla Maurer

This reading is the beginning of Paul's letter to the early Christian community in Rome. Paul went on three expeditions in Asia Minor and around the Mediterranean Sea to convert people to become followers of Jesus, regardless of their cultural or religious heritage. This new faith was for everyone. Journeying from town to town Paul grew fond of the people he met and worshipped with, and it must have been difficult to say goodbye and move on often.

In his letter to the Romans we sense that Paul misses the company of his brothers and sisters, although this particular community in Rome he was yet to meet. "I am longing to see you so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith," he says. Paul needs the contact with other Christians for the strengthening of his faith. Everyone brings different spiritual gifts with them, he says, and these gifts are an encouragement for others. Each gift is a brick, and together they build a house.

Some have the gift of listening; others have a sense for people in distress. Then some again have the gift of articulating themselves well or are blessed with a beautiful voice. Some are gifted with an eye for beauty, whilst others are making people feel welcome, regardless of who they are. Some are good at finding the right words to lift up our prayers to God, others are good administrators or confident leaders. Paul speaks of the harvest of spiritual gifts among Christians.

What is church if we cannot be together and harvest our gifts?

How can we strengthen each other in our faith if we are forced to stay apart?

What is good church ministry in times of social distancing?

I have thought about these questions a lot in the past weeks, and I am yet to find an answer. Technology enables to carry on with certain aspects of church life almost as normal, and yet it's not quite the same. When will we meet again, and how will it be? Will we be able to hug each other, have lunch

together and laugh without having to worry about the distance between us? Time will show the answer.

I feel a bit like Paul on his travels. Without my church family, something is missing and cannot be replaced. I am lost for answers how church is supposed to work under these circumstances. I also find it hard to imagine how church will be after the lockdown, because we simply don't know how the experience of social distancing and the awareness of this new health risk will change people's behaviour and our lifestyle in the long run.

Paul calls the disciples of Christ holy people or saints in his letters. "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people", he addresses his letter to the Christians in Rome. And the Christians in Corinth he writes: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people."

In the First Letter of Peter, God's people are even titled the royal priesthood called out of darkness into the wonderful light. The title of saints or royal priests for all believers became particularly important during the reformation. One of the defining principals of reformed churches is the priesthood of all saints, that means that all members of a church congregation are priests, spiritual leaders, not just the officially appointed vicar or minister. We all have a responsibility to lead and spiritually develop our church, and I believe that the importance of this has never been more evident than now as we cannot physically come together. We are God's saints, and we are God's priests, and with this awareness we are now all called to live our lives in worship in our own four walls.

This is a time to become aware of our sainthood and the sainthood of our sisters and brothers. This is a time to pay more attention to our spiritual gifts. This is a time to think about what we can contribute in church and society, our particular talents and abilities, and to develop them further, perhaps by reading articles and books about it, or further expanding our skills. This is a time to turning our focus inwards to find peace and inner strength to be a source of strength and encouragement for our sisters and brothers.

Let us become the saints that God has called us to be. Let us find the courage to put our light on a lampstand for all to shine. Whether together or apart, we are a community of radiant leading lights, and together we will find the right path for our church community during and after this crisis.

I don't have the answer what church is if we cannot be together, but together as a community of saints we will eventually find the answer. The history of the Swiss Church dates back over 250 years and has seen many ups and downs. Together we are writing another chapter of our history, so God will.

Prayers of Intercession, by Marianne Fisher-Hertig

Father, Lord

In a way we are lost, we are so unsure of things at present and yet and precisely because of that, we do want to praise and worship you our God. You are the everlasting, you are steadfast, you are never changing, you are the alpha and omega, you are omnipresent, you are unique, you are our hope, you are our peace, you are our comfort. Thank you, we praise you our Lord.

Ever present God, be with us in our isolation, be close to us in our distancing, be healing in our sickness, be joy in our sadness, be light in our darkness, be wisdom in our confusion, be all that is familiar when all is unfamiliar, so we are secure and can witness of your goodness to the world.

We pray for all who are affected by coronavirus, through fear, illness or isolation or anxiety, may they find relief and recovery.

In a moment of silence please lift up people known to you who are suffering in any way.

We pray for those who are guiding our nation at this time and making national policies. May they make wise decisions.

We pray for doctors, nurses and medical researchers, that through their skill and insights many will be restored to health. Keep them safe Lord.

We pray for the gravely ill and the dying, that they may know your comfort and peace.

We pray for the Leadership of our Swiss Church. Keep them safe, guide them during this unusual time, fill them with your wisdom as well as your joy.

We pray for our congregation. Keep us safe, help us to keep in touch in any way possible, keep our minds active and let the time come quickly when we can meet again in church. We ask and pray, fill us with your peace and hope. We pray all these things in your precious name our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen