**The Swiss Church in London**

**Audio service, 5 September 2020**

**Welcome**

Dear listeners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

Dear brothers and sisters

It’s been a few weeks since we have last been united through an audio service and it is my pleasure to bring the Sunday service of the Swiss Church once more into your homes together with Peter Yardley-Jones, Marianne Fisher-Hertig and Niccolo Aliano. Above all, I hope that you are healthy both in body and mind.

Wherever you are, we are united through the Holy Spirit, branches attached to one vine.

“Trust in God at all times, o people; pour out your heart before him; God is a refuge for us.” (Psalm 62:8)

“Vertraut auf Gott allezeit, ihr Menschen, schüttet euer Herz vor ihm aus! Gott ist unsere Zuflucht.”

„En tout temps, peuples, confiez-vous en lui, épanchez votre cœur devant lui! Dieu est notre refuge.“

Trust in God is often accompanied by doubts and a feeling of emptiness. Today we will think about our relationship with God and why doubts are not only normal, but indeed necessary and the gateway to a meaningful life. You will also be invited to become active at home and create a God jar. A God jar? Listen to the sermon to find out what it is.

**Prayer (Niccolo Aliano)**

Loving God: You trace our journeys and lead us through our life; you are our companion and our guide. As we move from summer into autumn, and as we return to our cities and homes, we pray that you continue to provide energy for all our works, make us rejoice at the beauty of life, and comfort us when we suffer, so that all we do may always be a token of your love.

This we ask in the name of Christ. Amen

**Psalm 62:1.7-12 (in German)**

Nur auf Gott wartet still meine Seele;

von ihm kommt meine Rettung.

Nur er ist mein Fels und mein Heil,

meine sichere Burg;

Ich werde nicht allzu sehr wanken.

Auf Gott ruht mein Heil und meine Ehre;

der Fels meiner Stärke, meine Zuflucht ist in Gott.

Vertraue auf ihn allezeit, o Volk,

schüttet euer Herz vor ihm aus!

Gott ist unsere Zuflucht.

Nur ein Hauch sind die Menschenkinder,

ein Trug die Herrensöhne;

auf der Waage steigen sie empor,

sind allesamt leichter als ein Hauch!

Verlasst euch nicht auf erpresstes Gut

und setzt nicht trügerische Hoffnung auf Raub;

wenn der Reichtum sich mehrt,

so hängt euer Herz nicht daran!

Eines hat Gott geredet,

zweierlei ist’s, was ich gehört habe:

dass die Macht bei Gott steht;

bei dir, o Herr, steht aber auch die Gnade,

denn du vergiltst einem jeden nach seinem Tun!

**Luke 6:45-65**

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.

When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land. When he saw that they were straining at the oars against an adverse wind, he came towards them early in the morning, walking on the sea. He intended to pass them by. But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

**Sermon (Reverend Carla Maurer)**

Dear parishoners, Dear listeners

The wearing of face masks has recently stirred up many emotions. Whereas most people do wear a mask as required, there are also those who question their effectiveness or see them as part of a conspiracy. Even among those who do wear the mask, the opinions over the correct way of wearing a face mask are split: what kind of mask should be worn? How should they be worn? Which masks are most efficient? And how often should they be washed or changed? It seems to me at times that a proper face mask war is going on in our streets.

The solidarity and kindness that many have praised in the first weeks and months of the covid-19 pandemic has given way to judgemental looks, prejudice and passive-aggressive behaviour towards those who see things differently. I detect these feelings in myself sometimes when people have their masks around their arm or under their chin in buses or shops. It’s so easy to get sucked into judgemental behaviour. We need to remind ourselves to remain kind and calm and tolerant in this hugely complex and confusing situation.

It is difficult to know what to believe and how to act amidst the cacophony of opinions and theories. Scientists, politicians, health professionals, teachers and conspiracy theorists have different opinions how to overcome the pandemic and it is impossible to check all the facts that are presented to us every day. Often, we are torn, and we don’t know what and whom to believe.

*Everyday decisions*

This is of course not a new situation. We have to decide what to believe every day of our life. In the supermarket we are exposed to a number of product choices promising us health or happiness or indulgence. Which promise will we follow? In a family conflict we hear different sides of the same story. Who do we believe? Newspapers report and interpret current affairs differently. Which facts do we trust?

The people who lived in Galilee 2’000 years ago were not worried about masks and hand sanitizers. Yet a faith clash they most certainly had! There was this man who people said could walk on water and heal the sick, and this caused a huge stir. Some people believed that he was their long-expected Messiah, the son of God even, a miracle healer, others believed that he was a con, a bluff or a political agitator. Everyone had on opinion. The pure presence of this man provoked the crowds, broke up families and led to turmoil.

The man who reportedly walked on water and healed the sick has been at the centre of a faith clash, that sometimes turned into war, for over 2’000 years and there is no end in sight. Who was he, and is it true what people say about him? Our opinions today are just as split as back then. Even his closest friends and companions sometimes turned away from Jesus, doubting that it was him.

*The void – our way to God*

Religious beliefs have been around since the beginning of human civilisation. Faith in God, or in gods, no matter what religion, is part of our human identity, and the roots of these beliefs are the most existential questions:

Where do we come from? What is our destiny? And what will become of us?

These questions can be scarry and it is often easier to look away and focus on the many distractions life has to offer. Those who do have the courage to face these most fundamental questions often find that they are accompanied by doubts, a loss of meaning or by the feeling of God’s absence. Often in religions these doubts are portrayed as something negative, either as a test to one’s faith, or the result of sin, or the inability to grasp the bigger picture. But for Christians the opposite is true. Our doubts lead us to God; they are the gateway to a mature and grownup faith. The theologian Peter Rollins says that “the felt experience of God’s absence is the fundamental way of entering into God’s presence.” We feel that something is missing, that there is a void to be filled. Acknowledging this emptiness is not a move away from God, quite the opposite, it leads us to God.

Of course, we can look at this void and turn away from it. We can say: there is nothing but emptiness. There is no meaning. There is no God. The universe and our existence do not make sense. This is a reasonable and understandable reaction. Or we can allow this void to be filled and accept it as our journey with God. Turn away from the void; or allow God to fill the void: this is a choice we can make. And I know which choice I find more attractive.

*The God Jar*

This all sounds good in theory, but how does this relationship with God work? Today I would like to invite you to create something at home. I invite you to create a God jar which will make this relationship with God as we explored it today more tangible.

At the end of this service or in the coming hours or days, find yourself an empty container. This can be a cardboard box, a glass, or a jar. The bigger the better!

Take a moment to acknowledge the emptiness of your container. Think about your moments of emptiness, when life felt meaningless and God absent. The acknowledgment of these feelings is the beginning of your journey with God.

Now you can begin to fill your jar with things you love, with memories, with questions, prayers and thoughts, things you are grateful for or things that you struggle with. Photos, items, newspaper articles, written notes… anything can go in your container. Over time it will fill up more and more with fragments of your life and the world you live in. Find a place for your container and keep filling your God jar with things and thoughts and memories whenever you feel like it.

Every now and then take out one of the items and look at it. Ponder for a while. Perhaps you will see things from a new perspective, with a new sense of hope. Perhaps you will find answers to your questions or surprise yourself with something you have put in there. Perhaps you will cry over your losses. The empty jar is no longer empty. Something happened in this empty space, and it keeps happening. Can you hear God’s voice speaking to you?

The fragments of your life are the foundation of your relationship with God. They are meaningful. They are powerful. They are you. Some of the things in your jar may be painful. Some of them bring you joy.

It all began with emptiness: “in the beginning the earth was formless and dark”, the Bible says. It all began with the feeling of abandonment: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”, Jesus cries out on the Cross. The disciples felt abandoned on the stormy sea and Jesus had to restore their trust. Jesus said into their emptiness: “It is I; do not be afraid”, and the storm calmed down. They found peace, inside and out.

Dear listeners, dear friends, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may your God jar always be filled with something, meaningful fragments of your life; and may these fragments bring you closer to God. May you hear God’s voice through the fragments of your life, and may this voice bring meaning and comfort and trust.

Amen

**Announcement**

I am delighted to announce that we will finally resume church services at the Swiss Church in Endell Street. I have been waiting for this moment for a long time, and I know so did many of you. Until the end of the year we will meet once a month, usually on the third Sunday. The first service will be on the 20th of September at 11am, then on the 18th of October, 22nd of November and 20th of December.

We will continue to produce audio services for every 1st Sunday of the month. For the other services, the words will be uploaded on the webpage or sent to your postal address if you wish.

If you are over 70 and wish to travel to the church in a cab, you will be entitled to up to £20 towards your taxi fare. Please bring your mask when attending church service! I am looking forward to seeing you!

**Prayers of Intercession (Marianne Fisher-Hertig)**

Let us pray:

Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be your name, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, On earth as in heaven

Oh Lord, we cry out for this to happen. We need your Kingdom here on earth. We entrust everything in your hands. Thank you for your steadfastness. We praise you for your love, care and protection for each one of us.

*Kyrie Eleison*

Father, we pray for everyone who feels lonely, frustrated and confused with the ongoing situation. For not being able to meet in church. Fill us with your hope. We ask for unexpected encounters in any form and shape.

We lift up anyone who is not well. Lay your healing hands on them. Restore them, give them energy.

*Kyrie Eleison*

Ever present God, we pray you lead and give wisdom to all world leaders. Be it Covid related, be it on the political front, be it in communication with each other, be it for resolution for peace across the whole world, be it for fair distribution of wealth and food.

Nearer home we pray for the schools starting this coming week. Help the anxious teachers, parents and children going back after nearly six months. May everyone settle in swiftly and feel comfortable.

Lord, we ask your guidance on the Consistoire, church staff and Carla. Show them the way ahead for our church. Protect them all. We pray for our congregation. Father, keep us safe, keep our minds active and fill us with your love and peace.

We carry on praying

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 forever

Amen