

Prayer

Holy Lord, Almighty Father in the confidence of your Son and uplifted by the Holy Spirit we bring our praise and worship to you.

Father we praise you for this day, for new opportunities to serve you, for new ways to know and experience your love.

Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for all your blessings to us day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, we want to worship you.

In the power of the Holy Spirit take our faltering praise and with all creation let it resound to your glory.

We ask it in Jesus name, Amen

Hymn O lord my God**How great thou art**

O Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder
consider all the works Thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
the power throughout the universe displayed;
Then sings my soul,
my Saviour God, to Thee,
how great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
how great Thou art, how great Thou art!

2 When through the woods
and forest glades I wander
and hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
when I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
and hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze;
Then sings my soul . . .

3 And when I think
that God His Son not sparing,
sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in,
that on the cross my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin:
Then sings my soul . . .

4 When Christ shall come
with shout of acclamation
and take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!
Then shall I bow in humble adoration
and there proclaim, my God,
how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul . . .

Reading**Genesis 17 v 1 – 8**

Abram was ninety-nine years old when the LORD appeared to him again and said, “I am God All-Powerful. If you obey me and always do right, ²I will keep my solemn promise to you and give you more descendants than can be counted.” ³Abram bowed with his face to the ground, and God said:

⁴⁻⁵I promise that you will be the father of many nations. That’s why I now change your name from Abram to Abraham. ^[a] ⁶I will give you a lot of descendants, and in the future they will become great nations. Some of them will even be kings.

⁷I will always keep the promise I have made to you and your descendants, because I am your God and their God. ⁸I will give you and them the land in which you are now a foreigner. I will give the whole land of Canaan to your family forever, and I will be their God.

What’s in a name

For many of us, this past week or so has been something of a brutal awakening.

I’ll be honest – I would never have considered myself an intentional racist.

I may have said things that are racist, I may have even done things that are racist, but only through ignorance or lack of thought – never through deliberate malice – for me that was important.

But I have had to think again this past week because for all my good intentions, I had no idea of the pain, of the hurt, of the anger just below the surface within the black community and I think I should have done.

When we lived in Oxfordshire, we quite often used to visit Bristol for shopping or to visit the exploratory and Cabot and Colston were part of the local landscape. Cabot I knew of. If I had thought of it at all, I would have guessed that Colston was a local figure, a philanthropist or something and in part I would have been right.

What I didn't know was that there was another side to Colston – that he made the fortune he shared, through trading human misery and I had no idea that the ongoing memorialisation of his name, through buildings – even a school and through public works of art, was a constant cause of pain for some people in that city.

I had no idea – and perhaps I should have done – but now I do know, I can't just close my eyes and claim ignorance.

Colston is a tainted name.

Names are important because they of the baggage they bring with them, the associations they have.

And changing names is important for the message it sends and for the commitment to change it recognises.

When God gave Abram a new name – when he stopped being Abram and became Abraham – God was saying from now on things will be different. With that new name, came a promise – a promise of prosperity, a promise of nationhood, a promise of a future. A new start and a new hope.

Whether we like it or not, through the Coronavirus and through the events of these past days, through lock down and black lives matter, we have been brought to the brink of a new land, a new future, a new hope.

It would be nice to pretend nothing has changed but that would be to just bury our heads in the sand. Everything has changed.

We have been violently awoken to the pain felt by sections of our community and maybe we need to be asking ourselves whether similar pain is being experienced by others – by women, by people with disabilities, by the poor and marginalised, by gay and transsexual people, by the elderly and infirm.

We might be saddened and shocked by the answer.

So maybe we need a new name. To show like Abram before us, that from now on things will

be different. That we have a history – yes a chequered history – but we want a better future.

Maybe Adlington URC Methodist needs to become Adlington United Church or Adlington Free Church.

Chorley URC has already changed its name 5 times through its history, Maybe now it needs informally to add something to its name, to tweak its name – 'Chorley new hope' perhaps to show that we want to change. We want to be the people God wants us to be, that we want to build a community around us that honours God, and everyone created in his image.

Because ultimately names matter – for statues, for buildings and yes even for churches.

Prayers of Praise and Confession

Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel,
the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the
God of Jacob.

Blessed be his holy Name; blessed in the highest
heaven and blessed among the, people of his
choice; blessed in his glorious kingdom and
blessed in his holy Church; blessed in time
and blessed through all eternity

Most merciful God we confess to you the
weakness of our faith and our lack of obedience
to Your will; we confess our reluctance to
continue our pilgrim journey and our slowness
to put our whole trust in you.

Forgive our foolishness and pardon our lack of
dependence on your promises.

Grant us the joy of your mercy and the
assurance of your guidance in the days to come;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Your Name.
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.

Do not bring us to the time of trial,
but deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are
Yours now and forever. Amen.

Hymn Blessed be the name of the Lord

Blessèd be the name of the Lord,
 blessèd be the name of the Lord,
 blessèd be the name of the Lord most high!
 Blessèd be the name of the Lord,
 blessèd be the name of the Lord,
 blessèd be the name of the Lord most high!

*The name of the Lord is a strong tower –
 the righteous run into it,
 and they are saved;
 the name of the Lord is a strong tower –
 the righteous run into it,
 and they are saved.*

2 Glory to the name of the Lord,
 glory to the name of the Lord,
 glory to the name of the Lord most high!
 Glory to the name of the Lord,
 glory to the name of the Lord,
 glory to the name of the Lord most high!

The name of the Lord . . .

3 Holy is the name of the Lord,
 holy is the name of the Lord,
 holy is the name of the Lord most high!
 Holy is the name of the Lord,
 holy is the name of the Lord,
 holy is the name of the Lord most high!

The name of the Lord . . .

Reading Genesis 18 v 1 – 15, 21 v 1 - 7

One hot summer afternoon Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre, when the LORD appeared to him. ²Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. He quickly ran to meet them, bowed with his face to the ground, ³and said, "Please come to my home where I can serve you. ⁴I'll have some water brought, so you can wash your feet, then you can rest under the tree. ⁵Let me get you some food to give you strength before you leave. I would be honored to serve you."
 "Thank you very much," they answered. "We accept your offer."

⁶Abraham quickly went to his tent and said to Sarah, "Hurry! Get a large sack of flour and make some bread." ⁷After saying this, he rushed off to his herd of cattle and picked out one of the best

calves, which his servant quickly prepared. ⁸He then served his guests some yogurt and milk together with the meat.

While they were eating, he stood near them under the trees, ⁹and they asked, "Where is your wife Sarah?"

"She is right there in the tent," Abraham answered.

¹⁰One of the guests was the LORD, and he said, "I'll come back about this time next year, and when I do, Sarah will already have a son." Sarah was behind Abraham, listening at the entrance to the tent. ¹¹Abraham and Sarah were very old, and Sarah was well past the age for having children. ¹²So she laughed and said to herself, "Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, will I really know such happiness?"^[a]

¹³The LORD asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh? Does she doubt that she can have a child in her old age? ¹⁴I am the LORD! There is nothing too difficult for me. I'll come back next year at the time I promised, and Sarah will already have a son."

¹⁵Sarah was so frightened that she lied and said, "I didn't laugh."
 "Yes, you did!" he answered.

The LORD was good to Sarah and kept his promise. ²Although Abraham was very old, Sarah had a son exactly at the time God had said. ³Abraham named his son Isaac, ⁴and when the boy was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, just as the LORD had commanded.

⁵Abraham was a hundred years old when Isaac was born, ⁶and Sarah said, "God has made me laugh.^[a] Now everyone will laugh with me. ⁷Who would have dared to tell Abraham that someday I would have a child? But in his old age, I have given him a son."

Out of the blue

*"No one would have believed
 in the last years of the 19th century
 that human affairs were being watched*

by intelligences that inhabited the timeless worlds of space.

No one could have dreamed we were being scrutinized as someone with a microscope studies creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water.

Few men even considered the possibility of life on other planets and yet, across the gulf of space minds immeasurably superior to ours regarded this Earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely they drew their plans against us"

The opening of H G Wells's War of the Worlds.

In that book, people are living their everyday lives, obliviously to the onslaught that is about to overwhelm them.

Well I think we know now how that feels. To misquote Wells – "No one would have believed in the last months of 2019 that this world was about to be turned upside by a microscopic virus- a thousand times smaller than the width of a human hair. But slowly and surely it happened."

We all had plans for this year – I was about to celebrate my 60th – it was all planned. And suddenly and without warning – everything changed – our world was turned upside down.

We are not the first people to experience such unexpected change.

The people of Germany were taken totally by surprise 30 years ago, when the Berlin wall was torn down and overnight the two Germanys ended their 40 year division.

No doubt, the day before the events of Genesis 18, Abraham and Sarah were busy minding their own business, getting on with life, planning for their immediate future.

I'm sure they had begun to doubt the promise God had made to them – the promise that they would be the parents of a nation.

Maybe they had resigned themselves to their fate and were making the best of it.

They had no idea what was going to happen to them. Even on the very day their world changed, they were oblivious to what was about to take place.

Genesis 18 v 1 say "One hot summer afternoon Abraham was sitting by the entrance to his tent near the sacred trees of Mamre" And I sort of imagine him dozing in the shade, relaxing, having completed whatever tasks needed doing that day.

And then.....

God comes to Abraham and tells him that within the coming year, Sarah will have a child. I'm not surprised she laughed – but it happened.

For years the Church has felt like the childless Abraham and Sarah – heirs to a promise that rings somewhat hollow. Remember God's word to Jeremiah "I will bless you with a future filled with hope—a future of success, not of suffering." And the risen Christ's words to his followers "go and make disciples of all nations". And the Church like Abraham has felt old and decrepid, broken from a hundred years of decline.

And in an instant that has changed. Since 1917, the church in the UK has suffered relentless decline.

The last few weeks have transformed the landscape and through online media, churches have experienced congregational growth that has rolled the clock back 20 years or more.

When God visited Abraham that summer's day at Mamre his cosy world changed. Nothing could ever be the same again. The old world was gone for ever.

When we were visited by the scourge of Coronavirus our world changed and I don't think we can ever go back to how we were before – even if we want to.

We will be living in a new normal, for the church as much as for the world and that may seem frightening for some – as frightening as the prospect of becoming a father in old age, but with change comes opportunity.

For Abraham the chance to father a nation. For us, the opportunity to rediscover and reenergise our mission to make disciples of all people.

Coronavirus came as a bolt from the blue, unwelcome, unwanted, but maybe not unnecessary.

Maybe we needed the shock of lock down to wake us from our sleepwalk to oblivion. Maybe we needed the Coronavirus to shock us out of our complacency, out of the rut we had got ourselves into.

Well it has achieved that at least – but now we need to ask God what he has planned for our new normal.

I can't promise it will be easy, I can't promise it won't cost, I can't even promise we will like it, but I can promise that God will bless us through it, if like Abraham before us, we keep faith in God and trust him to be faithful to his promise to us and to all people.

“He will bless us with a future filled with hope—a future of success, not of suffering.”

Amen

Act of Commitment

We have spoken a lot about life in the new normal, and that's great, we need time to get our bearings.

But there comes a time to stop thinking and to start planning and doing.

I want us to have a moment now, just to begin to set our agenda for the future and to commit ourselves to be the new church in the new normal.

I am aware that we come from a whole range of churches – not just Adlington URC Methodist and Chorley URC.

Wherever you are from, whichever fellowship you attend – if any indeed – I'd invite you now to sit quietly for a moment and in the quiet consider how you will respond to the new normal, and how you believe the church should change to minister in the new reality.

What could you do to help make new disciples in the new normal.

What skills and gifts have you got or can you identify in the church which might enable us to witness more effectively in the days to come.

In the quiet, offer your skills, your talents and the skills and talents you have identified in the fellowship to serve God. Thanks God for the gifts we have been given and ask him to bless their use to witness to him.

And maybe God is beginning to speak to your heart, to give you a vision or maybe a nudge to do something differently or to offer something new in the future. Maybe the Holy Spirit is pointing you towards a new area of mission or service for yourself or for the church.

Offer that nudge, that vision to God and offer yourself to help make it happen. Ask God to give you the Holy Spirit to inspire, strengthen and equip you for the work he has in mind.

Prayer.

Lord God we offer our thoughts and our lives to you. Through your Holy Spirit surprise us, shock us, enable and equip us to be the people and the church you want us to be in the new normal.

Amen

It could be that already or maybe in the days to come, you may feel God speaking to you, giving you a nudge as to where he is leading.

Wherever you are, don't think that nudge is for you and you alone. Please share it with you fellow Christians.

We have set up a WhatsApp group – life after lockdown. Please share your thoughts there and together we will discern the will of God for ourselves and for our churches.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray to the Lord, who is our refuge and stronghold.

For the health and well-being of our nation, that all who are fearful and anxious may be at peace and free from worry:
Lord, graciously hear us.

For the isolated and housebound, that we may be alert to their needs, and care for them in their vulnerability:
Lord, graciously hear us.

For our homes and families, our schools and young people, and all in any kind of need or distress:
Lord, graciously hear us.

For our Queen, Elizabeth, our Prime Minister Minister, Boris Johnson, his cabinet, members of parliament and our own MP, Sir Lindsay that service of our nation and the welfare of humankind may be their highest calling, that they may be guided in the ways of love and peace and serve you in all they do:
Lord, graciously hear us.

For a blessing on our local community, that our neighbourhoods may be places of trust and friendship, where all are known and cared for:
Lord, graciously hear us.

For a our families and friends, that they may our love and your protection even as we separated through lock down:
Lord, graciously hear us.

We commend ourselves, and all for whom we pray,
to the mercy and protection of God.

Merciful Father,
accept these prayers
for the sake of your Son,
our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen

Hymn Forth in thy name O Lord I go

Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go,
my daily labour to pursue,
Thee, only Thee, resolved to know
in all I think, or speak, or do.

2 The task Thy wisdom hath assigned
O let me cheerfully fulfil;
in all my works Thy presence find,
and prove Thy acceptable will.

3 Thee may I set at my right hand,
whose eyes my inmost substance see;
and labour on at Thy command,
and offer all my works to Thee.

4 Give me to bear Thy easy yoke,
and every moment watch and pray,
and still to things eternal look,
and hasten to Thy glorious day.

5 For Thee delightfully employ
whate'er Thy bounteous grace hath given,
and run my course with even joy,
and closely walk with Thee to heaven.

Benediction

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord
And the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
Will be with us all, evermore.
Amen