

Welcome to worship at Salisbury Methodist Church. Because we ARE Salisbury Methodist Church, even though we are not meeting face-to-face or in the building we call SMc. We are the body of Christ in this place and individually members of it. And we worship in spirit and in truth; in spirit we are with one another, even though in body we may be distanced.

So I invite you now to sing, or if you prefer just to listen, as we worship God together in the hymn:
Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

[Hymn: Guide me, O thou great Jehovah]

Now let us join together to pray:

Loving God,
We give you thanks, even in this time of trouble,
That nothing can separate us from your eternal love:
neither illness nor isolation,
neither doubts nor disease,
neither fear nor frustration,
neither poverty nor powerlessness,
neither worry nor weariness,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us
from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Loving God,
Sometimes it is very hard to hold onto that faith.
In this moment our lives, our institutions, even our
whole world
Feel so precarious and unsafe.
We face a future we cannot imagine
Both in the days
And even in the years to come.
We are afraid, O God.
We feel all alone.
We do ask where you are in all this.

Come to us
In our isolation
As our Saviour who hung alone on the cross and cried,
“My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”
Open our eyes to recognise you
Here with us
In the midst of our global turmoil,
Alongside all who are suffering,
Within our own troubled hearts.
Give us the strength to hold fast
To the assurance that you are with us
With our minds
Even when we cannot feel it in our hearts,
And in our hearts,
Even when we cannot see it in our world.

For seen or unseen,
Known or unknown
God is with us.
This is our faith.

Amen.

Today is, of course, Mothering Sunday.
This is always a day of mixed emotions
And this year there will be so many added dimensions.

Mothering Sunday is truly about coming home
To the mother church.
Perhaps today, as we are all in our own homes,
It is more like the mother church keeping in touch
With children who have left home!
But we know that those bonds of love
are never broken by distance or absence
and that mothers never stop being concerned
for their children, no matter how old they grow
or how far they fly.

And so it is, of course, with the church.
We continue to watch over one another in love,
A community of mutual mothering
In the name of Christ.
And as we do so we embody the love of the God
Who gathers her children in love

As a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wings.

At SMC it is our custom to give flowers to all the
women,
And so my children have a posy for you all
And a song to help you worship:

[Children sing]

Now we hear our reading from the psalms:

[Margaret reads Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.]

As we speak the sun is shining,
A breeze is blowing, making the grass gleam
And the daffodils nod.
The birds are nesting and singing with delight.
Let's take a moment to find some beauty around us,
And focus on it.
The world goes on
And continues to declare that God is good
And that all God has made is good.
May we open ourselves to all the sources
Of delight and comfort that surround us,
That we might be sustained
to live in harmony with all the world.

O God, give us the eyes to see together
The beauty and the pain of your world,
Existing close beside one another
And held together in your love. Amen.

Now Margaret will read our Gospel reading for today.

[Margaret reads John 9: 1-41

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when

Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him,

‘What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?’ He answered them, ‘I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?’ Then they reviled him, saying, ‘You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.’ The man answered, ‘Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him. Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would

not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.]

What good news is there
On this day?
When the way life normally works
Has been turned upside down?
When things we took for granted
Are now massive challenges?
When things we thought were impossible just a week
ago
Are now very much a reality?

It’s like being hit in the stomach
And utterly winded.
Or being blind
And suddenly being dazzled
By a new and unknown light.

There was before the virus
And all of a sudden there is after.
And quite how we got from
One to the other
We can’t begin to understand.

Instinctively
We want answers.
Like the blind man’s neighbours,

we want an explanation.
How did this happen?
Like the Pharisees,
We want to understand this virus:
What it does to us?
How does it fit with what we already know?
Like the Pharisees, too,
We are divided:
Some say the government is overreacting
But others say the government isn't going far enough.

Maybe,
Like the disciples in today's Gospel,
We want somebody to blame:
"Who sinned, this man or his parents,
That he was born blind?"
Who messed up,
That so many people are dying?

They asked who to blame
For the man's blindness.
And Jesus replied:
"...he was born blind
So that God's works might be revealed in him."

This answer strikes me as problematic
On first reading,
Because it sounds to me a bit like Jesus is saying

That God made the man blind
In order that God's works might be revealed in him.
And that would be outrageous!
Who could love a God
Who would condemn a human being
To a life of suffering
Simply in order to display God's power?

That's simply not consistent
With the picture of God
We get in the rest of the New Testament.
So this line sent me back to my Greek,
Where I discovered what Jesus is saying is more like
this:
"He was born blind; but let God's works be revealed in
him!"
In other words: he just was born blind.
There is no rhyme or reason.
It is what it is.
And it is terrible for this man.
BUT since he was born blind,
Let God work in his situation as it is.

That speaks to me about the situation we are in.
There is no rhyme or reason to Covid-19.
It just is what it is.
And it's terrible.
BUT God is working in the reality as it is.

But at the same time,
God does not intervene to remove suffering.
I think that's something we often struggle with, don't
we?

"If God is a God of love,
God would prevent the Coronavirus crisis..."

We want to pray for God
To intervene
And put an instant stop to this virus,
Just as Jesus stepped in
And miraculously healed the blind man,
Putting everything right all at once!

But experience teaches us
That we are much more likely
To face a long, gruelling struggle
Before we come out of the end of this,
And there will be great suffering along the way.

And for many of us,
This reality is a heavy blow to our faith.
We feel abandoned by God
Just when we need God most.

But let's look again at our Gospel.
Because perhaps our expectations

Of God's works are a bit naïve;
Perhaps they are guided more by wishful thinking
Than by what the life of Jesus showed us.

Everything wasn't fixed for the blind man all at once.
In many ways his ordeal was just beginning.
Although restricted in many ways,
He led a quiet life when he was blind.
And he never asked to be healed.

But once his eyes were opened,
His neighbours didn't recognise him any more.
He was interrogated by the religious authorities
Over and over
To a degree that must have felt like persecution.
All of a sudden he was having to speak up,
To justify his own existence
And experience
And identity.
His parents disowned him to save their own skin.
That always feels to me like the most painful bit of the
story,
How would you begin to process that kind of betrayal?
And nobody believed a word he said.
He had gone from a quiet life,
Immersed in the familiar struggles his own daily living
To finding himself forced into formulating
Theological arguments

In the religious courts!
And then he was driven out!

So by the time Jesus sought him out,
All the usual sources of security had failed him.
Nothing in the life he's been used to made sense any
more.
He had nothing left.

And into this nothingness
Came Jesus,
Offering a new way
of seeing the world around him,
a new way of life
that was based on his experience
of finding who he was within who God is.

This is what the scientists and philosophers call
'paradigm shift'.
A paradigm is a framework within which we
understand the world,
A set of theories and assumptions that make sense of
what we experience.
But when more and more things occur that don't make
sense
Within this framework it enters a state of crisis
And becomes obsolete.
Sound familiar?

Only from this complete disintegration of the familiar
Can the new paradigm emerge.

The blind man suffered
The loss of his life as he knew it
And then he was open to receive
The new life in Christ.

And I think this story
Shows us the complex way God uses suffering.
God does not cause
Nor remove suffering.
God does not fix everything
But bears with it with us.
God does not change the outward circumstances,
But changes our inner lives
So that we find grace and love
No matter how bleak the world around us.

I remember at one time
being so angry with the Psalmist,
Because I felt those words of great comfort
In Psalm 23 seemed to me to be utterly empty and
false.
Because I was suffering
And there was no sign of any green pastures or still
waters.

And then one day I realised,
The psalm does not promise that we will NOT
Walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
But that WHEN we do
God's rod and staff will comfort us
With the assurance of God's company
Through the valley.

God accompanies us
through every moment of suffering
so that we know God living in us
and us living in God,
even though we die.

This is what makes God God:
That God works even in the things that oppose God's
will
To bring about God's salvation.
We need only look to Christ on the cross
To see that even in the most God-forsaken moment in
all history,
God is with us
And God is love.
Amen.

Our prayers of intercession come from the Church of
England. So let us pray together and with all Christians:

Let us pray to God,
who alone makes us dwell in safety:
For all who are affected by coronavirus,
through illness or isolation or anxiety,
that they may find relief and recovery:
Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For those who are guiding our nation at this time,
and shaping national policies,
that they may make wise decisions:
Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For doctors, nurses and medical researchers,
that through their skill and insights
many will be restored to health:
Lord, hear us,

Lord, graciously hear us.

For the vulnerable and the fearful,
for the gravely ill and the dying,
that they may know your comfort and peace:
Lord, hear us,

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.

And the prayer that unites us no matter what:

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come;

thy will be done;

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation;

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory,

for ever and ever.

Amen

At this point we usually have our notices, and so I would like to thank the team who have made this act of worship possible. Most of all Nick who has put everything together and out it online in miraculous ways beyond my understanding! And to Jonathan, who in similar mysterious ways has provided our hymns. Thank you to Margaret for reading and to the children for being children!

May I encourage you to keep looking at our website. Over the coming weeks we will be using it to provide materials for worship and devotion, which we hope will help you during this extraordinary time. We will also publish the newsletter on the website as usual. Also check the Methodist Church website regularly, as it also provides lots of helpful; resources and links to live-streamed acts of worship that you can join in.

I know that many of our congregation will not be able to share in this act of worship because they are not confident in using the internet. If you are confident, please do consider how you might help somebody else to access all these valuable resources online, in a way that keeps both them and you safe, and observing the advice on social distancing. If you do find a good way to do this, please do let me know so that we can enable more people to help in this way.

And finally, please don't hesitate to phone me and email me, whether you need something, or just want a chat. It is essential to stay connected during this time.

So I invite you to join in singing along or listening to our hymn, The King of Love my Shepherd is.

[Hymn: The King of Love my Shepherd is]

A prayer by the President of Conference, Rev. Dr
Barbara Glasson:

We are not people of fear:
we are people of courage.

We are not people who protect our own safety:
we are people who protect our neighbours' safety.

We are not people of greed:
we are people of generosity.

We are your people God,
giving and loving,
wherever we are,
whatever it costs

For as long as it takes
wherever you call us.

And the blessing of God, Life-Giver, Pain-Bearer and
Love-Maker

Rest and remain with you

And with those you love

And with those you struggle to love,

Now and forever.

Amen.