

Dear Heaton Moor United Church,

Hope you are doing well. It will be one year this week, since the first lockdown, and so will be my pastoral letters. For the last one year I have been writing so many words both in these pastoral letters and in my reflections. Thank you for your support and encouragement to all these my writings over the past one year.

On the 23rd March, it will be one year since lockdown and is observed as 'National day of Reflection,' inviting us to pause and reflect on the loss of life. Stockport Interfaith is organising an event on Monday the 22nd March and the details of it is attached, and those of you interested in it are invited to join us at this event on zoom. Thanks to JoAnne who has worked on this event along with other faith partners and with the Stockport Council.

Thanks to Sharon and JoAnne for their video reflections this week on our YouTube channel. Appreciate them for their efforts and contributions. Thanks for your support and participation at the Circuit Zoom services and also at the weekly Lenten meditations.

This week we had our Circuit meeting, and it is very sad that two churches in the Circuit have agreed to cease to worship in their church buildings, and we are called to offer our prayers to the members of those congregations. I also attended Presbyteral synod of the District and affirmed our call and commitment to ministry. As a faith representative from Stockport, I attended the first meeting of Faith Panel of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority hosted by Mayor Andy Burnham this week, and it was good to know that they consider faith partners as contributors for the transformation of the society.

The funeral service of Audrey Smith will be on Monday the 29th March 2021, and the details of the timings will be posted. Let us keep David and his family in our prayers.

Herewith I am sending you a reflection on John 3:16 for this week along with the worship resources.

Next week we begin the Holy week with Palm Sunday, and I invite you all to prayerfully spend time reflecting on the meaning and relevance of Jesus' journey to the Cross. Thank you all for your contributions to the school pantry food project. If any of you prefer a pastoral walk with me, please do email me and we can always do it.

May the peace of God be with you all and may you all have a blessed week.

Thanking you,

With warm regards,

Raj

19.03.2021

MESSAGE FROM THE CO-EDITOR

Another week has passed us by and we are in the fast lane to Easter now. This week started with a meeting with Stockport Council regarding the Stockport Interfaith Reflection event next Monday. This event is an opportunity of people of all Faith's to come together to reflect on the last 12 months and it would be lovely to see some of you there. The event details are on page 4. My final meeting of the week, last night, was about Muddy Church - wandering and wondering and I'm excited to use some of the ideas they have in the very near future.

As advised last week services will resume in the building on Sunday 18th April, COVID restrictions will still be in place so it is essential you book via the booking form which Sharon has sent out. If you have not received the booking form or encounter any problems completing please contact the office. We will be open for Private Prayer each Sunday until then and on Good Friday between 11:00 and 12:00. In the meantime we continue to offer the following things we can all do together but apart this week;

- Take part in Tune In to God: Fridays@5:17.
- Watch the weekly reflection posted on Sunday morning on our YouTube channel
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCyhynK2FIPDTbOuqBiO6D9A>
- On Thursday evening light a candle from 8pm until 9pm

Just as in the time pre-covid the team are here to answer any questions, be a listening ear or signpost to other services. Please do get in touch with us if we can be of any help.

If you have anything you would like included in the weekly notices please let me know. As always if you have any questions or comments please do not hesitate to contact me.

JoAnne

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 ^{GB} Heaton Moor United Church

 Heaton Moor United Church

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It's great to see the donations on our JustGiving page – to date we have raised just under £500 so almost 50% of our target of £1000

If you would like to donate the cost of your vaccine please visit

www.justgiving.com/heaton-moor-united-church

Two doses of the COVID vaccine might be between £4-£30. If you could have afforded to buy it for yourself please celebrate your vaccination by making a donation.



MARK 12:31 love thy (global) neighbour

TWIN YOUR VACCINE

Communities across the UK are being protected against COVID but across the world, there are many countries where this is impossible. It may be that they cannot afford to vaccinate their people or that their infrastructure may not even include basic refrigeration in places.

UNICEF has vast experience in delivering vaccines worldwide and so will be major partners in distributing vaccines to the very poorest in the world through their association with the COVAX programme.

Join Heaton Moor United Church in
raising funds for UNICEF
www.justgiving.com/heaton-moor-united-church



**School Pantry
CAR PARK COLLECTIONS**

THIS SATURDAY

**Saturday 20th March at
Heaton Moor United Church**

From 10:30 until 12:00

To the left is a list of items that we are currently short of. If you can help in any way that would be great.

If you would like further information, please contact JoAnne on community@heatonmoorunitedchurch.org.uk or 07340 269 354



Audrey Smith

The Funeral and Thanksgiving for
Audrey's life is taking place on
Monday 29th March.

The cortege will call at Church (circa 2:15pm)
prior to going to Stockport Crematorium

Please light a candle at this time and
say a prayer to remember her

God of Mercy,
from whom we come,
by whose Grace we live,
in whose love we are held at last;
surround us with your presence
that in our grief and loss
we may find assurance and hope
in the One who died for us and rose again,
Even your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Thursday Prayer



Father, we are so blessed to have such superb medical care in our country, particularly at this time. We pray for all who serve, particularly those who have long hours. We thank you for them, we pray for your strengthening for them. Pray for all who at this time are receiving care. Bless our nurses, our doctors, our chaplains, our care workers bless those who work in our laboratories who drive our ambulances and other vehicles. And Lord, we pray that in your mercy, you would protect this nation and the whole world from the coronavirus. Christ the Lord, surround our NHS with your care we pray in Jesus name. Lord Jesus Christ, you said to your disciples, 'I am with you always'. Be with those in the NHS who are offering themselves selflessly for the good of others. We as a nation are indebted to them. As we light this candle – hear our prayers for them, and keep them in your loving care. Amen

Linda Fleming Heaton Moor Pastoral Worker

#ResetTheDebt On Friday 26th March join JPIT in prayer for just and compassionate solutions to the debt crisis we now face in our communities.

Since the pandemic began, millions of people have been forced into debt simply to make ends meet. One year ago, many families received their first unpayable bill because of Covid-19. Many are still facing an uncertain future weighed down by debt.

JPIT are also joining in action, to call on our government to support families weighed down by debt because of Covid-19.

What can you do?

Pray – look on our social media channels throughout the day for Prayer prompts

Take Action - add your voice to the Reset The Debt petition to call on the Chancellor to #ResetTheDebt <https://e-activist.com/page/77548/petition/1>

Pray Together – there will be a live broadcast 12:45 – 1:15pm on You Tube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMZL-5wATUw>

Investing in change: Coffee Break, Tuesday 30th March at 11:30am

The UK Nuclear Weapons Financing Research Group (UKNWFRG) brings you a short session to help you think about how to make your money work for good. Boil the kettle and join for half an hour with an opportunity to stay and discuss afterwards. This event will get you equipped to lobby your bank to invest your money ethically and ask them to change their policies around investing in fossil fuels, arms, nuclear weapons, and other ethical priorities.

Register at [https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/making-your-money-work-for-good-a-uknwfrg-coffee-break-tickets-143783780157?utm_source=JPIT&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12239940 Newsletter%20March%202021&dm_i=1MV9,7ACEC,41GB9S,TJUU0,1](https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/making-your-money-work-for-good-a-uknwfrg-coffee-break-tickets-143783780157?utm_source=JPIT&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=12239940%20Newsletter%20March%202021&dm_i=1MV9,7ACEC,41GB9S,TJUU0,1)



National Day of Reflection - 23rd March 2021

People across the country will come together on this day to reflect on our collective loss, support those who have been bereaved, and hope for a brighter future.

In Stockport there will be a InterFaith Reflection on Monday 22nd March for people of all Faith's to come together. Details of how to take part are below.

Around Heaton Moor look out for our Reflection Trees which will be tied with yellow ribbon and have prayers, reflective passages for people to take.

Prominent buildings will be lit up at 8pm as part of the National Day including Stockport Town Hall and Heaton Moor United Church.

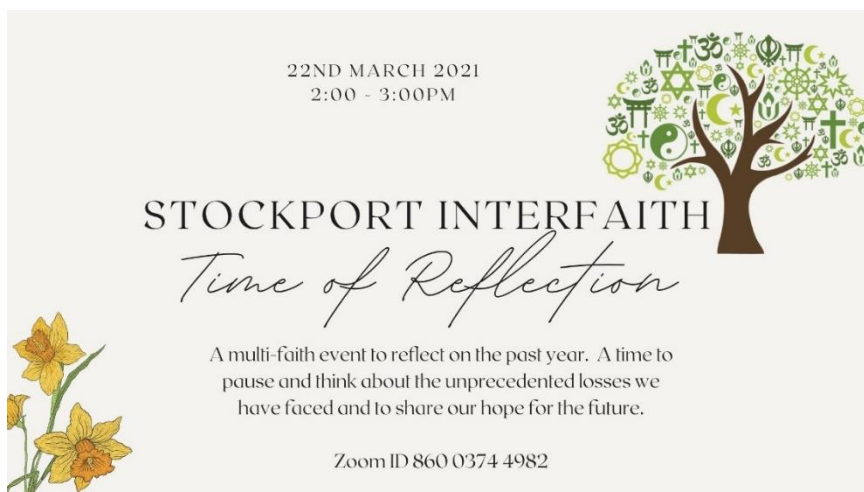
How can you take part?

Before the day

- ♥ Fill your window with yellow hearts or yellow flowers. Marie Curie have posters that can be coloured in <https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/get-involved/day-of-reflection/show-your-support#templates>
- ♥ Tie a coloured ribbon around our tree at Church in memory of someone
- ♥ Sign the online Book of Remembrance by Stockport Council to express sympathy following the passing of someone from Stockport <http://www.condolence.website/>

On the Day

- ♥ There will a national minute of silence at 12 noon and Marie Curie will be holding an online reflection event. To register for the event click here <https://goodgrieffest.com/events/a-moment-of-reflection/>
- ♥ At 8pm we are asking people to have another minute's silence whilst lighting a candle or shining a light to remember someone who has died and to show your support growing through a bereavement.
- ♥ Join in with www.goodgrieffest.com they will be hosting a series of events on the 23rd March in conjunction with Marie Curie. The event is exploring the theme of "hope" and "meaning" at a time when the UK is mourning over 100,000 lives lost to Covid-19.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

School Pantry Food Collection – 20th March 10:30 – 12:00

Heaton Moor United Church Car Park

Circuit Lenten Study – 24th March

See notice header for zoom link

Stockport Inter Faith Time of Reflection - 22nd March at 2pm

See page 4 for further information – zoom id 860 0374 4982

Traidcraft Live Fair for Lent - 22nd March at 6:45pm

Live Fair for Lent Monday 22nd March at 6.45pm on zoom.

There's a further opportunity to attend this presentation by Matt Oliver, who works for Traidcraft, highlighting all sorts of ideas, products, producer stories, and facts about Fair Trade. It will emphasise the fact that Lent isn't all about giving things up, but can be an opportunity to learn and try out new things — and that when people ask you whether Fair Trade makes a difference, you'll have some answers.

If you would like to join please contact Jill McKenna from Marple URC for the link jillyian@ntlworld.com

National Day of Reflection – 23rd March

See page 4 for further information

Green Evangelism – 25th March 7:00 – 8:30pm

What does climate justice have to do with sharing our faith? We know as Christians we are called to care for creation, but what if our mission and evangelism were more connected to climate justice than we thought? Can we do one without the other? In what way does our commitment to God's earth enable and power our mission?

To register click here [Meeting Registration - Zoom](#)

#ResetTheDebt – 26th March all day

See page 3 for further information

Celebrate 5 years of Eco Church – 26th March at 11:00

Register on Eventbrite (<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/eco-church-fifth-anniversary-online-celebration-service-tickets-138450825145?aff=ebdssbonlinesearch>)

Investing in Change – 30th March at 11:30am

See page 3 for further information



Prayers from Linda

Prayer for the Sick

Jesus, you control all the parts of our body, and you know when it's not working at its best. Sickness leaves us stressed and steals time from all the things we do. To be honest, Lord. I don't like to be sick. But times like this also make me rest in you, so I thank you for this chance simply to wait on you. And asking for your touch, Lord. Help us to be patient and allow you to do your work. If doctors are involved, give them wisdom, and thank you for providing the help we need, however you choose to provide it. Whether this is a test, or simply a time to trust, as my Good Shepherd, we know you will lead us beside quiet places and restore our soul and body. I trust you and want to follow your leading. Help me to welcome this time not as an interruption in my carefully planned schedule, but as an opportunity to draw strength and nourishment for the journey ahead. You are my healer and my Great God. I look to you and give thanks for the promises in your Word that assure us of your presence and your help. Amen



We ask you Lord our God for your love, strength and care to be with the family of Sarah Everards the young women who was murdered by a police officer, we prayer for people who have been affected by this, we don't understand why these things happen, Lord help us to keep praying for her family, help her family to be strong and comforted and to cope with the future with out Sarah.

If anyone would like to share a Prayer with the church family, please call Linda on 07564839380 or

E-mail lindawfleming625@gmail.com.



No names required because God Knows.

For God so loved the world...

Reflecting on John 3:14-20

One of my early childhood Sunday school memory verses was John 3:16, which I memorised both in my home language Telugu and in the KJV English. Perhaps that verse was part of a common curriculum for all those attending Sunday schools, for I remember my Sunday school teachers explaining how important this verse is in the life of Christian faith, explaining that we are all saved because we are Christians. I also remember that this verse was displayed on placards at international sporting events in bold letters “John 3:16.” Later in my adult life, I did come to know that there was one Rollen Stewart in the US, who went to some major events to be spotted by Television broadcasters with a rainbow wig and a T-shirt emblazoned with a slightly cryptic message: “John 3:16.” He was spotted at NBA finals, at Moscow Olympics and was also told to be at the Royal wedding, where he was seen dancing just underneath the balcony where Princess Diana and Prince Charles stood in 1981. For Stewart his television presence with “John 3:16” T-shirt was a way of ‘spreading’ the gospel. Two years back, when driving on the highways in the US, I found huge billboards with a signage of “John 3:16” on it, for no one can pass by without being captured by the sight of that billboard.

I was wondering what would have been the purpose of displaying John 3:16? To my surprise I have seen Christians in my home town in India carrying a placard with “John 3:16” on their evangelistic gospel walk in the town called “March for Jesus.” Even in the UK, in Manchester Piccadilly, I have spotted a guy walking with a placard with a similar signage of “John 3:16” shouting out loud that ‘Jesus saves.’ To put it in a broader theological frame, what does Bible and Bible verses mean in a non-Biblical world today? Is it meant for Christians to go and read that verse to know that since they believed in Christ they are saved, while the rest are perishing? For people who are not familiar that this is a verse taken from the Bible, in a secular Western context and in a multi-faith Indian context, what does “John 3:16” signage mean and what impact does it make on them? What is the message of John 3:16 for us today?

On this fourth Sunday in Lent, the prescribed lectionary gospel reading is from John 3:14-20, which gives a context to this often-quoted John 3:16 verse, and it will be helpful for us to reflect on it. This verse is part of Jesus’ late-night conversation with an old Jewish Rabbi Nicodemus, explaining about the importance of being ‘born again’, which is ‘born from above’ and how Spirit of God leads people towards that experience. Let me bring that verse up again for our reflection here:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not perish
but may have eternal life.”*

One of the problems that we have seen in the history of interpreting this verse has been that there has been an over-emphasis on the later part of this verse, where time and again it was referred to “whoever believes in him (Jesus) may not perish but will have eternal life,” privileging the strength on and of the believer, commanding power to the individual self and enjoying the gift of eternal life based on their choice. In which process, the emphasis on “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son” got a backbench leading to an extent of diminishing the strength in the grace of God who loves the world unconditionally. All those

who walk with this placard or those who installed the huge billboards of “John 3:16” are trying to project the love of God for this world based on people’s decisions, undermining the gracious unconditional love of God in Jesus to this world, and are portraying a narrow vision of God confined to the options of ‘either/or’ or ‘neither/nor’, not realising that God in Jesus is a God of all and for all, who has come not to condemn the world but to save the world (John 3:17). The other thing about this verse is about ‘believing’ which many put the emphasis on ‘believing’ as human act, not recognising that ‘belief’/ ‘faith’ is a gift and a fruit of the Spirit to this world. And the final thing about this verse is the emphasis on ‘eternal life’ as a reward of such believing, which many think it is about ‘life after death’ not recognising that when Jesus was speaking eternal life in John’s gospel it was all about life here and now.

Who is this God who so loved the world that he is able to give his son, send his son to save this world, offering belief/faith as a gift and granting eternal life to the world? The God of John 3:16 is a God who is love and all this God knows is to love, give, send, and save everyone in this world. This verse invites us to celebrate the God in Jesus who is an embodiment of love and grace, who has come into this world to save, by risking his own life, granting eternal life in the now, for the cause of the Kingdom of God here on the earth. Allow me to share three things from this God of love:

1. The Area of Love:

Where did God of love demonstrate his love? ‘For God so loved the world...’ The world with all its fragility was found by God as the recipient of God’s love. God loved this material world, the cosmos, with all its vulnerabilities and wounds. God not just loved the world, but God loved it in its superlative degree, ‘so loved’, loved it to the moon and back. The emphasis on ‘so’ is important, for God in Jesus did not love this world half-heartedly, or partially or temporarily, but loved this world ‘so much.’ The strength is in the love of God for this world. God did not ‘so love the’ world because of this world’s perfection, but despite all the imperfections God in Jesus loved this world, demonstrating to this world that the length and breadth of God’s love is beyond measure, unrestricted, unrestrained, unbound, unconditional, unimagined and even unexplained in human words.

2. The Act of Love:

The act of love for this underserving world is exhibited by sending his son and giving his son to this world. Love is all about giving, with no conditions apply, giving everything including life for the cause of saving this world. In John 3:14, Jesus gives a clue to understand the act of love “that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...” The act of love for this world is in Jesus being with the world, identifying with the human flesh and being lifted up on the Cross for the cause of standing up for the Kingdom of God. To that extent of dying a public criminal death on the Cross, that this God in Jesus loves this world. There is no greater love than a friend dying for the other, and Jesus on the Cross did it and demonstrated it, inviting all those believing and following him to love the others to that extent. John 3:16 comes to life in correlation to I John 3:16, where John writes, “we know love by this, that he laid his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” The act of love that Jesus showed to this world becomes meaningful, when the followers of Christ similar to Jesus lay down their lives for one another, and not in holding a placard of John 3:16.

3. The Aim of Love:

Why is this God in Jesus so loving this world? The aim is to save this world and to grant eternal life. The aim of God in Jesus coming into this world is not to condemn people on any count but to save them at any cost. Salvation and eternal life offered as gifts by God in Jesus is not about 'other-worldly' stuff, but is about transforming the lives of people, communities and the entire world, for it is to establish love and give life a chance to love all of God's creation. The aim of God in Jesus so loving this world is not about condemnation and perishing, rather is about 'new creation' is about 'new heaven and new earth,' is about celebrating life over death and love over hate. Eternal life is all about eternal love, where love transcends all boundaries, identities, limits and barriers. Believing in Jesus is about demonstrating such a love to all of the creation today, where we are called to give up our power and privilege. Believing in Jesus is about creating a sense of belonging in this world that we are all being loved by God, and its God' love that offers us grace to love God and love one another. Only then John 3:16 comes alive in our context for our times today.

On this fourth Sunday of Lent, which is observed as Mothering Sunday in the UK, the message is clear and loud, that we are called to celebrate God in Jesus' unconditional and unrestricted love for this world. And as followers of Christ, we are called to demonstrate 'for God so loved the world,' to this world, transcending all the barriers we have made in the name of identity and tradition. I have always wondered, for people who are carrying this placard of "John 3:16" right on the streets where poverty, homelessness, hunger, consumerism is existing as realities, what is the message that they are communicating? All what John 3:16 is inviting us is not in holding that placard and moving around the streets today, but in living that word, demonstrating the love of Christ for one another by caring, by compassion and by standing for justice. It is time that we need to move on from just saying, 'Jesus is love' to showing 'how Jesus is love today in our contexts?' You, I and the church today are called to be 'living letters' of demonstrating the God in Jesus' love, for it is the love of Christ that is inviting us to be like Christ. Believing should lead us to becoming, and becoming should create belonging, and such a sense of belonging to God's love should keep us be-loving.

The world this week is shocked to know that there are people who are discussing the colour of the unborn child in the context of mixed marriages. Has the love for one another died today where racism still thrives? Has the colour, race, gender and caste of a person a barrier to love in this world today? God in Jesus is inspiring us to love, and only to love, as our public witness to this world, transcending the barriers of hate. The country was also shocked to know that violence against women continues unabated with the news of Sarah Everard in the UK, and it is called as an 'epidemic' that needs immediate action. Has the love for one another died today in our context where patriarchy still thrives? God in Jesus is inspiring us to love and treat one another justly and equally. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." The call for us is to be living testaments of John 3:16, living, risking, giving and offering for the cause of love, and only for love. The text of the Bible comes alive only in living it out, in demonstrating it and not just in reading or in holding it out in the public. May God of love, God of John 3:16 be with us all so that we will live to love and strive towards a community of love for all. Amen

Raj Bharat Patta,

Paul and the Roman tribune: citizenship and the broken body of Christ

A Bible study by Revd Dr Raj Bharat Patta

Read: Acts 22:22–29 (New Revised Standard Version)

²² Up to this point they listened to him, but then they shouted, “Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he should not be allowed to live.”

²³ And while they were shouting, throwing off their cloaks, and tossing dust into the air, ²⁴ the tribune directed that he was to be brought into the barracks, and ordered him to be examined by flogging, to find out the reason for this outcry against him. ²⁵ But when they had tied him up with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who is uncondemned?” ²⁶ When the centurion heard that, he went to the tribune and said to him, “What are you about to do? This man is a Roman citizen.” ²⁷ The tribune came and asked Paul, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.”

²⁸ The tribune answered, “It cost me a large sum of money to get my citizenship.” Paul said, “But I was born a citizen.” ²⁹ Immediately those who were about to examine him drew back from him; and the tribune also was afraid, for he realised that Paul was a Roman citizen and that he had bound him.

Reflect

- Have you ever spoken about citizenship to a person who has crossed oceans fleeing violence and war in their country of origin? How do they understand citizenship? Where is their citizenship?
- What is Christian about citizenship? What is political about Christian discipleship today?
- How can our Christian faith strengthen our understanding of citizenship? How can our citizenship strengthen our Christian faith?
- How do we understand citizenship in the light of undocumented people living as refugees or seeking sanctuary, who are denied citizenship?
- What is your take on Paul’s saying to the early Christians at the brand-new church at Philippi in Philippians 3:20, “But our citizenship is in heaven”?

Think

Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem brings in some interesting discussion on citizenship, legal rights, and privilege in the context of sharing his Christian testimony in the public sphere. Earlier in Acts 21:39, we read Paul claiming that he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city. Paul shared that God told him, “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles,” then there was an uproar against him shouting that he not be allowed to live. The public sphere at Jerusalem was dominated by religious groups who

could not think of God beyond their own tradition, beyond their temple, or beyond their tribe. Therefore, they were furious when Paul shared that God was sending him away to the Gentiles, or in other words they were threatened by the inclusion of Gentiles into the fold of God's love. That fear of the stranger provoked them to shout for Paul to be killed, for he was attempting to open the love of God to the strangers.

So the tribune of the Roman empire ordered that Paul be brought into the barracks to be further examined by flogging. As they tied Paul with thongs, Paul disclosed his Roman citizenship and questioned back: how lawful it is to punish a Roman citizen? The tribune and Paul had back-and-forth conversations about his Roman citizenship. This text illustrates the importance of Roman citizenship, the citizenship of the empire, and the value and respect that it carried in the first century, for it gave strength and ability to protect its holder from floggings and bodily violence.

It is important to note that Paul carried multiple citizenships, as a Tarsian and as a Roman, though they worked on different levels, unlike the multiple citizenships of today. The Tarsian citizenship was granted to Paul from his birth to a family residing there, and imbued Paul with certain rights and responsibilities to his town and to its members. Besides this, Paul also gained Roman citizenship by birth as his father would have been a Roman citizen, which gave him additional rights and privileges while he travelled within the Roman empire, which the Tarsian ID could not provide. The ID of a Roman citizenship in the ancient world was one of the most treasured possessions, giving privileges and numerous other rights which were unattainable for a typical provincial person.

In order to gain access to the multi-ethnic public sphere of Jerusalem, Paul had to introduce his Jewish religious ID, his Tarsian city citizenship ID and also his Roman citizenship empire ID, and share it in his public testimony.

Listen

Thinking about this text in the context of our times today, we notice the importance of citizenship, which has been a matter of privilege for some, a matter of struggle for some and a matter of denial for others. Citizenship has been understood as that which is given to people who qualify to live in a given territory, who are born in that province, speak like the majority, and look like the majority. The denial of documents to people who come to our country seeking sanctuary has been increasing, for they look different to the rest of the locals. Since these people do not have the right papers, they are denied the right to work and to earn their bread, rice and curry. Poverty among these people has been on the rise as they don't qualify for food banks, nor are they able to work to earn their living. In this context, this text calls our attention to two major things: the issue of xenophobia and the issue of undocumented people, who do not have citizenship anywhere in the world.

I would want to propose 'global citizenry' as the 'broken body of Christ,' which is not determined by territorial nation states, but which is bound by life-concerns, seeking solidarity with all suffering people and offering hope to all people and of all nations. From the perspective of Christian discipleship, citizenship is based on love, dignity and respect for one another. In this 'broken body of Christ,' we are all different members, called to care for the least parts of the body. Christian faith offers hope to those people who are struggling to cope with documentation and the right to live. Our faith in Jesus Christ is trans-territorial, and so should our love be.

This text is inviting us to overcome the fear of the stranger with love and hospitality towards them. It is challenging us to strengthen our citizenship in advocating for the right to live to those people to whom it is denied.

Church Action on Poverty's 'Your Local Pantry' scheme (www.church-poverty.org.uk/pantry) is a great initiative that affirms the dignity of all people irrespective of their identity and addresses hunger in their respective localities. We as local churches are working with a local charity in providing food for children and their parents, addressing holiday hunger as our action in showing love towards the stranger, no matter their ethnicity and identity.

Act

Could you discuss community sponsorship for refugees with your local churches? Could you register your churches as spaces of hospitality for people struggling in filling their documents for the right to live? Could local churches work with local charities to address holiday hunger for school children who do not qualify for food banks?

Pray

God of justice, help us to work as the 'broken body of Christ', recognising that it is the 'global citizenry'.

Help us to offer love and hospitality to the stranger by building friendship and feeding the hungry.

God of love, help to us recognise that you have not given up on us and are willing to collaborate with us in transforming this world and in renewing this creation, where peace and justice will ever flow to all the nooks and corners of this world.

Grant us your grace, courage and strength to make a difference in this world. In Jesus' name. Amen

Take it further

Find out more on these issues by looking at...

- *Bread of life in Broken Britain: Foodbanks, faith and neoliberalism* by Charles Roding Pemberton (SCM Press, 2020)
- Voices from the Margins: voicesfromthemargins.org.uk
- Your Local Pantry: www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk

Sunday 21st March 2021 - Rev. Bethany Willers

This short act of worship has been prepared for you to use whilst we are unable to use Methodist Church premises. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

Opening Prayer

O Lord, I come to you this day, to hear your word and to rejoice in your presence in my life, now, and always.

Hymn: Great is Thy Faithfulness (Singing the Faith 51)

Sing/ Read /pray /proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dTKlqmdfHSk>

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
there is no shadow of turning with thee;
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;

as thou hast been thou for ever wilt be:

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!

*Morning by morning new mercies I see;
all I have needed thy hand hath provided.*

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy and love:

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

Thomas O. Chisholm (1866-1960)

Let us pray together

O God I give thanks to you this day for your great faithfulness.

May I match your faithfulness with my own.

You have sustained me in times of trouble,
and carried me when I could not bear my own weight.

Thank you for the gift of your love and grace,
shown to us in Jesus Christ.

I seek to give my life to you in service and to love others as you have first loved me.

May I do all these things with the help of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Reading from the Old Testament
Jeremiah 31:31-34

Today's Gospel Reading: John 12:20-33

Time to Reflect

I love reading multiple translations of a passage to help me make sense of what I am reading. One of my favorites is one called "The Message" - which translates scripture into modern-day English. Here is how The Message interprets John 12:24-25:

“Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, real and eternal.”

It’s hard to believe, but it has been over a year now since the pandemic began and we all had to change how we go about living our lives. We changed how we work, see family and friends, travel, and worship, among many other things. It has been hard, and awful, and at times, devastating. Many of us wanted, instead, to cling to what life had been before - and many of us are still longing to go back, for life to return to “normal” - whatever that was. We liked being the grain of wheat and we want to continue being the grain of wheat if we can.

But perhaps we have been given a chance to do what Jesus calls us to do in this passage - to give up our lives for something new, for something more closely resembling the kingdom of God. This time of struggle has made us get more creative about caring for our neighbor. At times it has opened our eyes to neighbors who were in need right under our noses before. If we take this time of continued upheaval to let go of the life we had before, and be reckless in our love, perhaps something new will flourish that looks more like what God wants for us.

Is God calling you to be more than just a grain of wheat? How has God cared for you and nurtured you in this time of being buried? Where have you seen signs of new life and new growth spring forth? Are there areas of your life you need to tend to? Are there areas

of your life you need to let go of and realize that you cannot or should not go back to?

May we ponder all of these things in our hearts with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Take a time to sit quietly

A time of prayer

Loving and gracious God,
We lift our prayers to you this morning,
knowing that you hear all of our prayers,
whether spoken or unspoken, for you know all that is on our hearts and minds.

We pray this day for the world... for the distribution of the vaccine, for people affected by war or natural disaster...

We pray this day for our nation... for the NHS and all who work hard to care for people within it, for our leaders, for all the people as we find new ways to live in community with one another...

We pray this day for our church... that we might shine with the light of Christ in the world, that others will come to know him through our actions, help us to be the hands and feet of Jesus...

We pray this day for our own concerns...

Oh God, let us pray now as Jesus taught us to pray...

The Lord’s Prayer
Our Father

**Hymn: Listen to Lauren Daigle singing
“You say”**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=slaT8Jl2zpl>

or sing a verse of a hymn that comes to mind

A prayer of blessing

Lord, may I be as a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies so I can rise up to new life in Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Original Materials by Rev. Bethany Willers

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Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, ‘Sir, we wish to see Jesus.’ Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honour.

‘Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—“Father, save me from this hour”? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’ The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, ‘An angel has spoken to him.’ Jesus answered, ‘This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.’ He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.