

The Vine at Home
21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Call to worship

God is here, as we, God's people, gather to praise, to pray and to reflect.
Move amongst us, by your Spirit, that we might see your Kingdom come, your will be done.
Amen.¹

Hymn: 36 STF – There's a quiet understanding

Opening Prayers

Let us create a space for the Spirit, this day.

Let us pause, and be still, and listen to the word of God.

Let us listen to the quiet understanding that comes from gathering in the Spirit, whether we gather physically or gather as part of God's whole church, meeting on this Lord's day, around the world.

Let us open ourselves up to the love we feel in Jesus, to the promise that you love us, as we gather today in your name.

Let us feel that sense of openness, with our brothers and sisters around the world, that quiet understanding.

Let us give our thanks and praise to you, gracious God.

Let us pray, in the quiet...

[Hold a moment of stillness].

Come amongst us, holy God, clear our hearts and minds from distractions and turn our thoughts to you this day.

May we be at one with you, though Christ our Lord, Amen. ²

We say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Exodus 1:8 – 2:10 - The Israelites Are Oppressed

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. **9** He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. **10** Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." **11** Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. **12** But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. **13** The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, **14** and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

^{1 2} Opening prayers by Tim Baker

15 The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, **16** “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” **17** But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. **18** So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” **19** The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” **20** So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. **22** Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every boy that is born to the Hebrews^[a] you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live.”

Birth and Youth of Moses

2 Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. **2** The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. **3** When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. **4** His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. **6** When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. “This must be one of the Hebrews’ children,” she said. **7** Then his sister said to Pharaoh’s daughter, “Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” **8** Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Yes.” So the girl went and called the child’s mother. **9** Pharaoh’s daughter said to her, “Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.” So the woman took the child and nursed it. **10** When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses,^[b] “because,” she said, “I drew him out^[c] of the water.”³

Romans 12:1-8 - The New Life in Christ

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters,^[a] by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual^[b] worship. **2** Do not be conformed to this world,^[c] but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[d]

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. **4** For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, **5** so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. **6** We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; **7** ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; **8** the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.⁴

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Matthew 16:13-20 - Peter's Declaration about Jesus

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,^[a] the Son of the living God.” **17** And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. **18** And I tell you, you are Peter,^[b] and on this rock^[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” **20** Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was^[d] the Messiah.⁵

Reflections on the readings

It doesn't matter how old we are or what we are doing in our lives, we all have to follow rules. We have to obey the law, and we also have rules for our schools and workplaces.

Why do we need rules?

The main reason for having almost any set of rules is to keep us safe. For example, the law says you have to be 17 years old before you can drive a car, as we have to be sure we keep all drivers, walkers and cyclists safe.

You have to be a certain height to ride some roller coasters, because the rides aren't built to be safe for every body type. You'll only be kept safe by the bar or harness if you're a certain height - you wouldn't want to slip free and fall off the roller coaster!

All cars have to drive on the same side of the road, so people don't crash. Cars have to stop at red lights, so everyone can move around safely. Loud music has to stop at a certain time of night in lots of places, so that people can sleep. These rules all make sense, and we would live in a much more dangerous world if they didn't exist.

Some people make up rules that we know, deep down, aren't fair. Maybe a group of children at school make a den in the playground and go around telling everyone, “No girls allowed”, or tell a certain person they can't join in. In some countries across the world, until very recently, there was a rule that women weren't allowed to drive cars. There have been rules all over the world that allow people to treat others differently and unfairly because of the colour of their skin, where in the world they come from, their religious beliefs, and who they love (that is to say, there have been rules that allow people to treat gay people unfairly). Lots of work has been done to change these rules, but it's still a problem in a lot of places in our world.

In the Bible story from Exodus, the King tells everyone there's a new rule. He's a bit worried because he thinks there are too many Israelites. He makes the Israelites work for him as slaves, but he's worried they might get to be too big a group and start taking over. So, the first thing he does is to work them harder and harder. Then, he tells the women who act as midwives for the Hebrew women: when you help the women to give birth, let the baby girls live, but kill the baby boys. That's the new rule they're given. But they know, deep down,

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that's wrong. They trust in God and they feel in their hearts that God is telling them not to follow it. So they play a little trick. They secretly let all the babies live, and when the King demands to know why they haven't killed any of the boys, they say, 'These Hebrew women, you know? They're just too quick for us. They're so fast - they always have their babies before the midwives even arrive!' The story says that the women get rewarded for this - God sees the good they've been doing and is very pleased. They were very clever, and they found a way to avoid following the cruel new rule.

Sometimes, I think we are called to do something when we see people making unfair rules. Sometimes we just get a feeling inside us that something isn't right, and God can help us to see that. In the book of Romans, it says:

Do not be shaped by this world. Instead be changed within by a new way of thinking. Then you will be able to decide what God wants for you. And you will be able to know what is good and pleasing to God and what is perfect. (Romans 12:2)

That doesn't mean we should ignore the world and just focus on God. It's ok to enjoy being a part of the world, because we were created to live life to the full. What I think this passage means is that, sometimes, we'll come across things that just don't feel right, and that's ok; we can turn to God, who will help us to think differently about it.

We see a similar impulse in today's Gospel reading, don't we? As Peter names Jesus as his Lord, as he recognises that this man Jesus is also – somehow – the Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus affirms him. But that affirmation also includes an instruction to engage in the here and now. This isn't just a gospel reading about how important it is to 'know Christ as our Lord and Saviour', it is also a reading about what happens when we come to that realisation. It is about the invitation to build a church, a society, a world, where love reigns – here and now.

Lots of people throughout history have found clever ways of showing that they don't think a rule is right. Rosa Parks is a great example. She was the woman who refused to give up her seat on the bus for a white man – by doing that very simple but extremely brave thing, she was sending the message that she, and other people of colour, deserve to have the same rights as white people. Black Lives Matter protesters all over the world are using their voices today to tell people in charge that people of colour are still not being treated fairly.

Greta Thunberg is a name you might have heard quite often. She started the 'School Strike for Climate' movement where she encouraged school children all over the world to take a Friday off school as a protest for more action on climate change. She wants to make sure kids her age and younger actually have a world to live in when they are adults, and wants the people in power now to do their bit to save the planet for their grandchildren. She broke the rules that say that every child needs to be in school every single day to send a message that she is serious about wanting change. If you think there is a rule that is unfair, you can sign a petition or write a letter to your member of Parliament. If it's a problem at school, or in your job, you can talk to your teacher or manager to say that things aren't fair.

There are lots of things we can do, and the passage from Romans continues to say:

Each one of us has a body, and that body has many parts. These parts all have different uses. We all have different gifts. Each gift came because of the grace that God gave us. If one has the gift of prophecy, they should use that gift with the faith they have. If one has the gift of serving, they should serve. If one has the gift of teaching, they should teach. If one has the gift of encouraging others, they should

encourage. If one has the gift of giving to others, they should give freely. If one has the gift of being a leader, they should try hard when they lead. If one has the gift of showing kindness to others, that person should do so with joy.

For me, that means that we don't all have to do the same things. We all have ways we can make a difference. Some of us are teachers. Some of us are scientists. Some of us are artists. Some of us are writers, singers, builders or doctors. Whatever our skills, and whatever our gifts, we can use them to make a difference. All of these things give us skills to speak out when a rule is leading to people being treated unfairly.

The one thing we know for sure is that God is with us and, when we speak out for people who deserve more love from others, we know we are doing God's work.⁶

Hymn: 673 STF – Will you come and follow me

Prayers of intercession

God of all grace, hear us now, as we join in with people praying all around the world. You know that there is much that is not right with our world, our community, our family and our own lives. You know the things that trouble us, the thoughts that weigh heavy on our hearts.

God of all grace, we hand these thoughts and prayers to you now. You who say 'come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest'.

As we've reflected on Greta Thunberg's story, so we pray for all affected most by the climate crisis and climate injustice – those whose homes, livelihoods and families are at risk of destruction by rising sea-levels, floods or increased storms.

God of all grace, we hand these thoughts and prayers to you now. You who say 'come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest'.

As we have reflected on your invitation to Peter, to become the rock on which your church is built, so may we find our place in your story. May we come to know the calling you have on our lives, the ways we can be an answer to prayer.

God of all grace, we hand these thoughts and prayers to you now. You who say 'come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest'.
Come amongst us, by your Spirit. Amen.

Blessing

Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy, Lord of all we have and are, Inspire us by your Spirit to be a part of your mission. Amen.⁷

⁶ All Age Talk written by Emma Dobson

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker