

The Vine at Home
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Hymn: 24 STF – Come, now is the time to worship

Opening Prayers

Across the centuries of human existence, people have gathered around fires to talk, to cook, to reflect, to tell stories, to pray. Our prayers today have a fire-side theme.

[You might like to find ways to represent this in your service. Perhaps with candles, with a video or image of a fire, or with a live fire (if it is safe to do so)].

Lord of light,
God who brings us together,
Spirit of the divine, who guided the Israelites as a pillar of fire,
We gather around the fire-pit today – to pray, to be open, to encounter you, Holy God.

Firstly, Lord God, we take a moment to quieten our minds and declutter our thoughts. Perhaps, if it is helpful, you might like to imagine you throwing the distracting thoughts and unhelpful chatter in your brain into a fire place right now. Imagine them being consumed by the flames, helping you to focus on the light, the warmth, the comfort of God's love.

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

Secondly, we take a moment to offer you our thanks and praise.
You are a holy and awesome God. A God who, somehow, is with us and present in this very moment.

We give you thanks, for all that we have received. For the many blessings that we take for granted or miss the opportunity to notice.

Join us at the fireside, Lord God, and create a space for us to share our stories, to learn, to grow, to encounter you.

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

And finally, fill us with your Spirit, your Spirit that descends as a flame.
Fill us with the energy, inspiration and grace we need to go out into the world and bring about change, bring about love, bring about hope.

Here we are Lord, come amongst us, like fire.

Amen.¹

We say the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Exodus 14:19-31

19 The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. **20** It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

¹ Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. **22** The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. **23** The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. **24** At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. **25** He clogged^[a] their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

The Pursuers Drowned

26 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." **27** So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. **28** The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. **29** But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

30 Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. **31** Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.²

Matthew 18:21-35 - Forgiveness

21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church^[a] sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" **22** Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^[b] times.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. **24** When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents^[c] was brought to him; **25** and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. **26** So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' **27** And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. **28** But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;^[d] and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' **29** Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' **30** But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. **31** When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. **32** Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. **33** Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' **34** And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. **35** So my

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heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[c] from your heart.”³

Romans 14:1-12 - Do Not Judge Another

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith,^[a] but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions. **2** Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. **3** Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. **4** Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord^[b] is able to make them stand.

5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. **6** Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. **8** If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. **9** For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister?^[c] Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister?^[d] For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.^[e] **11** For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to^[f] God.” **12** So then, each of us will be accountable to God.⁴

Reflections on the readings

The Exodus narrative is one of transformation. It is the long, twisted and turning journey of the people of Israel escaping slavery in Egypt and making their way across the desert to the ‘Promised Land’. A journey that should have taken a matter of weeks, but ends up taking them forty years.

Perhaps we have our own experiences of wilderness, and maybe we've discovered some of those during the last few months of lockdown? Perhaps Coronavirus has been a kind of wilderness for you. Even if it hasn't, I imagine that you may be able to call to mind a wilderness times – whether recent, or long past. Those times when you felt cut off from all that is good, all that is wholesome, all that is life-giving.

This period of the Old Testament is the Israelites wilderness time. And yet, in the midst of their wilderness experience, the Israelites also come to know and understand their God, perhaps better than ever. They deepen their relationship with Yahweh, and come to learn something of the lengths God will go to protect them. We see that in today's story, as the Lord parts the waters of the Dead Sea and lets the Israelites pass, before destroying the pursuing Egyptian army. God saves the people once again! Is that a familiar experience for

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you too? Looking back, and with the benefit of hindsight, can you see moments of growth amongst the wilderness times?

In today's passage from Exodus, we hear reference to the pillar of cloud that guided the people by day – and elsewhere in Exodus we are told about a pillar of fire that led them by night. This is a very real, very present experience of God – the divine made tangible in a pillar of fire. We have taken this image of fire as our starting point for today's service. Throughout scripture, there are these moments when God reveals something of the nature of the divine, and often the presence of fire is not far away.

- Think of the way the fire does not consume Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in Daniel.
- Of the fireside breakfast that Jesus cooks for his disciples after his resurrection.
- And of the Holy Spirit descending as tongues of fire in Acts.

There is something about fire that, perhaps, takes us a little closer to understanding God's nature. Fire is not always a positive image, and many of us will have stories of the destruction and pain brought about by fire. And yet, fire is also a refiner. A purifier. Perhaps a way we can come closer to the heart of God.

So, what would it look like for us to become a 'fire-side people'? To become the kind of church that was as comfortable with each other as we might be around a fireside? To seek to follow the pillar of fire out from inside our buildings and our 'golden hour' on a Sunday to discover more of what God is calling us into. To join with Jesus in his fire-pit breakfasts on the beach? To hear what the Spirit is saying to us today?

Our gospel reading for today is one exploration of what that new way of living might look like for our finances, the way we talk about debt and the way we treat each other 'in the marketplace'. Jesus' story illustrates for us the immense power of forgiveness, and the forgiveness of debts. As the king is generous to the man, he is set free from all the burden of guilt and pain that comes with debt. However, he then fails to apply this same principle to his fellow servant. And the price to pay for his lack of mercy is a heavy one.

In this story, grace is not cheap, but it is free. The man is freely forgiven all his debts, but that brings with it a certain expectation about how he will treat other people. A 'higher calling'. An invitation to be better.

We see in this story the invitation to imagine the whole world gathered around the fire-pit: talking as equals, sorting out debts and showing a forgiving spirit to one another. As soon as someone threatens this equilibrium with selfishness and greed, the cycle is broken. It is a constant learning and growing journey for us to rebuild these communities of togetherness. Becoming a 'fire-pit people' is a life-long journey.

That same Spirit is alive and present in the reading from Romans too. Do not judge each other, support each other – whether you are strong or weak. This is the same invitation into community: an equitable community where all have an equal stake and an equal opportunity to input and lead. This is not the world we live in. The world we have created is greedy, and it suits those who are willing to seek power and preserve it for themselves. To remake that world is not an easy task.

But it is the task that Jesus was involved in, and in which he calls each of us to play our part. Will we pull up a cushion, and settle down by the fireside, to listen to the stories of Jesus, as he shows us a different way of living? Will we listen to his invitation to each one of us – today – to find our place in the ‘big story’ of love that God is writing?

Will we be guided by the pillar of fire? Will the tongues of fire that is the Spirit settle on us, even as we gather, and inspire us into a new way of being? Let us be still for a moment, and reflect on today’s act of worship, and that image of the fire-pit flames... *[Pause]*

Here we are Lord, seeking to be a fire-pit people. Lead us, gracious God, lead us. Amen.⁵

Prayers of intercession

Gracious God, our world is broken.
There is so much injustice, so much that is wrong with our world.

Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse all that is wrong, all that is evil, from this world.

We look out into a society, and a country torn apart by the impact of Coronavirus and the way it has affected so many of us differently. As we wait for the dawn, for the end of this time of darkness, we see great injustice at play in the way the virus has affected those already vulnerable.

We see isolation and mental health crises.

We see joblessness and livelihoods destroyed.

We see racial injustice highlighted and white supremacy emboldened.

Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse all that is wrong, all that is evil, from this world.

We look out into a world where so much is still wrong – so much is not as we wish it was. As we look out onto that world, Holy God, show us a road to healing.

We see poverty, and many people going to bed hungry tonight.

We see climate change, continuing to affect the most vulnerable, continuing to destroy livelihoods around the world.

We see structures and systems built to allow the rich to get richer and the poor, poorer.

Come, Lord, with your refiner’s fire, and cleanse all that is wrong, all that is evil, from this world... And let it begin with me.

Living God, show me what is mine to do. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.⁶

Hymn: 348 STF – He is Lord.

Blessing

As we go from this place,
May we go with the fire of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.
May we go out to see a world where your justice burns, brighter than ever. Amen.⁷

⁵ Reflection written by Tim Baker

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Tim Baker

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⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker