

The Vine at Home

Sunday before Advent - 34th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Call to worship

As the darkness of winter draws in,
As the coldest time of the year approaches,
As we close our doors and turn up our heaters,

Come, Lord of light,
Come, God of the warm embrace,
Come to us, Immanuel, God with us. Amen.¹

Hymn: 317 STF – At the name of Jesus

Opening Prayers

Let us prepare ourselves

For the encounter
For worship
For the Spirit to come amongst us.

In our preparations, we are sorry.

Lord, I have fallen short, I am sorry.

In our preparations, we encounter grace.

Lord, I know I am forgiven, loved and set free.

In our preparations, we give thanks for all we have received.

Lord, today I am thank for so much.

In our preparations, we praise and adore you, for you are the God of all things.

Lord, I praise you, for you are an awesome God.

In our preparations, we still our hearts and listen for your word to us.

Be still with me a while?

[Pause]

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Ephesians 1:15-23 Paul's Prayer

15 I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love^[a] toward all the saints, and for this reason **16** I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. **17** I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of

¹ Additional prayers by Tim Baker

² Opening prayers written by Tim Baker

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wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, **18** so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, **19** and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. **20** God^[b] put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, **21** far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. **22** And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, **23** which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.³

Matthew 25:31-46 The Judgment of the Nations

³¹ “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³ and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

³⁴ Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵ for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶ I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’

³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸ And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹ And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’

⁴⁰ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family,^[a] you did it to me.’

⁴¹ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴² for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³ I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’

⁴⁴ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ ⁴⁵ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”⁴

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Reflections on the readings

Tim Baker (The Vine Editor) shares some of his personal reflections:

2020 will almost certainly go down in the history books as ‘the year of Coronavirus’. Although there are still a few weeks left in the year and we don’t know what might happen, nor are we quite sure how much longer the virus will linger in our midst, this will always be the year when it became a global pandemic. Our great-grandchildren might one day study this year, and analyse how we responded to the earth-shattering events of Covid-19.

I, however, have always been an optimist. So, amongst the recognition that 2020 is the year of Coronavirus, I am hopeful it will also be a year that will be remembered for another reason – for the time that many of us woke up to see and recognise the racism inherent in our systems and structures.

2020 may also be remembered as the year of Black Lives Matter. But that is still up for debate, in fact – it is up to us. Because racism is as old as modern society, it has been going on for centuries and millennia. So our great-grandchildren will only remember 2020 if things actually change. If we change, and the systems and structures we are a part of change with us.

Since the tragic and violent death of George Floyd in America earlier in the year, there has been a renewed and re-energised commitment to the Black Lives Matter movement and to challenging the racism that exists across our societies, communities, institutions and relationships. The reaction to George Floyd’s death, and the protests, social media conversations, TV programmes and dialogues that have opened up have often been fuelled by strong emotions, and characterised by a desire amongst many not to ‘give ground’ or to ‘yield power’. Some of the reactions I have seen fit into the classic ‘5 stages of grief’.

- Anger – there has certainly been anger. And there needs to continue to be anger, whilst black people are dying in the streets, or systems are unjust and discriminate. How do those of us (like me) who have lots of white privilege respond to that anger? Are we trying to close it down and move on from it, or are we finding ourselves angry too?
- Denial – there has been even more of that. So much of the conversation here in the UK has been about denying our own racism and claiming that we are ‘not like the States’, or that we ‘have black friends so can’t be racist’. It is time we moved beyond denying the presence of racism in our society. How can each of us challenge that denial when we see it at action?
- Bargaining – how many of us have tried to bargain (perhaps with ourselves) about some of the racist prejudices or attitudes we have been taught and have internalised? How many have said, ‘I’m not racist but...’? Time to stop bargaining.
- Depression – there has been plenty of this too. The energy-sapping lethargy that follows on from trying to drive change and finding out that those in power don’t want to change. The frustrating, depressing realisation that our world is a long way from fair

and that black people and people of colour still get a much worse deal than those of us with white privilege.

- Acceptance – this is a vital first step. To accept that society is racist, and that those of us who have been brought up with any kind of racial privilege are at least a little bit racist too. Society made us that way, because it suits the society made ‘by white people, for white people’. If we can accept that, and do away with the denial and the bargaining, perhaps we can change.

If we can accept the presence of racism in our midst, and wrestle with what that means for our working lives, our families, our relationships, our churches, our communities...then perhaps we can start to **do** something.

And that’s where I think we need a sixth stage in the journey that we are on, processing the grief that comes with acknowledging our racism. That sixth step is action.

And that is what today’s gospel reading is all about, isn’t it – action. Not, ‘what books did you read about the poor?’, or ‘which statistics did you look up about the number of people in prison or hospital?’, but what did you **do**?

Whichever you did for the least of these, you did for me.

I’ve never been particularly comfortable with the phrase ‘the least of these’, but we take Jesus’ point: wherever you are in the social structure, your life matters. Those who are most abused and overlooked – their lives matter the most. And for any of us who find ourselves in a privileged position, how we treat those with less privilege than us is the defining feature of our lives and our discipleship.

So what are we going to do? What is your next step on becoming actively ‘anti-racist’? Do you need to do some reading and learn something about black history, or read something that might challenge you to grapple with your own racism?

Do you need to find people who are on this journey who you can have conversations with about tackling racism?

Are their friends or family members you need to ‘call out’ for their own attitudes or the things they say?

Are there movements or organisations you could support, by volunteering or donating, that are helping to tackling racism?

Wherever you are on your journey, today is the day to take the next step. To move into action – for it is by action that Jesus lived, and he calls us to do the same. Let us make 2020 the year we began to dismantle white supremacy.⁵

Prayers of intercession

During our prayers of intercession today, we will hear a few short reflections, and then pause. We invite you to bring your own prayers, thoughts and reflections to God during the times of quiet. If it’s helpful, you might like to get a notebook and pen or pencil to write or

⁵ Reflection written by Tim Baker

draw your ideas and thoughts as your pray. Otherwise, you might like to close your eyes to avoid distractions.

Let us pray.

Christ our King, enthroned on the cross bearing insults and torments, by your pain and your story, may true peace reign.

[Pause]

Bless and guide your body, the Church, that we may exalt you and share in the inheritance of the saints in light.

[Pause]

Christ our King, you endured the scoffing of leaders and ridicule from bystanders.

Rescue us from the grip of darkness and cynical abuses of power. Strengthen all who strive for justice and peace.

[Pause]

Christ our King, still our hearts to know your presence and share your peace. Bring us to declare that you are our righteousness.

[Pause]

Christ our King, in lonely agony you bore the pains of the world. Be with all who are desolate and afflicted, whose world is shaken. Be a present help, O Lord, in times of trouble and give courage and strength to all who live in fear.

[Pause]

We bring these, and all our prayers, in Jesus' name.

Amen.⁶

Hymn: 611 STF – Brother, sister let me serve you

Blessing

We rise from this moment, inspired by your message of inclusivity Lord God.

We go to welcome all people, to make space for all things,

We go to do all that we can, in the name of love.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Taken from Intercessions for Year C by Ian Black

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker