

**Dorset South & West Circuit - Written Service for Sunday 3 October 2021 –  
'Set your Sights on the Ideal' - by Revd David Cuckson**

**Opening Sentences**

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour. (*Psalm 8: 3-5*)

**HYMN Singing the Faith 75** (*Isaac Watts*)

1. From all that dwell below the skies,  
let the Creator's praise arise:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Let the Redeemer's name be sung,  
through every land, by every tongue:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

2. Eternal are your mercies, Lord;  
eternal truth attends your word:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Your praise shall sound from shore to shore,  
till suns shall rise and set no more:  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

**Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we praise you for our birth, the dawning consciousness of self poised for life – eager for experience; yet, ready to dart at a shadow.

We praise you for our first steps in life, the awareness of strength in body and mind – exploring life's possibilities; yet, soon disenchanting and easily hurt.

We praise you for our new birth in Christ, the awakening to your hope beating in our heart, and your life flowing in our veins.

We thank you now for the eagerness which knows no fear, and experience which does not pall, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Heavenly Father, you make us in your image; but we indulge ourselves and lose shape. You command the light to shine, but we prefer to hide in the dark. You have spoken and offered us life, but to our dismay we find that we have chosen death. Father, be patient with us; make us realise that our conceit will let us down, and give us the life which lasts, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And as we turn our thoughts to words of Scripture, we pray for understanding what has been done for our redemption, so that Christ may live in our hearts by faith, and be proclaimed in our lives by love. Amen.

**Genesis 2:18-24 (NRSVA)**

Then the LORD GOD said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.' So out of the ground the LORD GOD formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD GOD caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his

ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD GOD had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of man this one was taken.’

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

### **Mark 10:2-16 (NRSVA)**

Some Pharisees came and to test him they asked, ‘Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?’ He answered them, ‘What did Moses command you?’ They said, ‘Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.’ But Jesus said to them, ‘Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, “God made them male and female.” “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’

Then in the house the disciples asked him again about this matter. He said to them, ‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.’

People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

### **Reflection**

If you read the passage from Mark’s Gospel in isolation it seems to set an impossible standard. And there are some people who try and set this in stone and seek to outlaw any conduct that does not conform to it in every letter. But such an approach is at odds with Jesus’ usual attitude to the ‘letter of the law’. So he heals people on the Sabbath, which affronts the legalistic among the religious authorities, and he eats and drinks with people whom they regard with contempt and disgust, not the kind of people good people should associate with. There is a clue in the opening words of the passage that Jesus is getting at something deeper than might appear at first sight. It begins with some Pharisees trying to lay a trap for Jesus. And I think that we need to view Jesus’ response in this context – he is first and foremost out to show how illogical is the starting point of their challenge to him. The key to understanding what he is getting at in his reply lies especially in the way in which he alludes to the Creation story in Genesis.

So let us look first at the passage from Genesis. It is part of the Creation story. Or, to be more exact, it is part of one of the Creation stories. Because there are, of course, two quite separate accounts of the Creation. In the first chapter and the first few lines of what we have as chapter two we find the work of creation accomplished in six separate operations, each one assigned to one day. But then the second account begins, with no note of time, with a waterless waste and the creation of Man, made out of the dust. Both accounts contain elements which are echoed in other religions and traditions in the Middle East and it looks as though the biblical writers deliberately drew on those stories. We commonly refer to those stories as ‘myths’, in the sense that they make no attempt to be literal accounts of how the world came to be in its present form but they do contain real truths about the human understanding of the nature of God and of Man’s existence, his place, if you like, in the world he inhabits.

The other major consideration in approaching the account in today's passage from Genesis is that this has to be read in the context of the whole of the story, that goes on to tell about the Fall and the Expulsion from Eden and much of the following chapters until we come to the story of Abraham. So what our reading is about takes place in that, mythical, ideal state when all life was perfect, when humanity was in harmony with the rest of creation, with the world in which they found themselves, when man and woman were perfectly in harmony with each other, were truly one. This is how the world should be, how it was meant to be. That the Creation story goes on to tell how it all went wrong, when Adam and Eve broke the rules, in fact, the one rule that they simply had to keep, only serves to emphasise how it should be Man's challenge in each subsequent generation to make up for this greatest of sins, to remedy the state of the world. And this is to be the ultimate goal, to try and get back to the ideal. That is the target. That is the prize. That is what will bring Man back into perfect harmony with God.

And this seems to be what Jesus meant with the sayings in our Gospel reading, and in so much of his teaching. He so often spoke in absolutes – it is 'all or nothing', salvation or damnation. With him, 'nearly' is not good enough. So he does not want to engage with the Pharisees about the niceties of the religious law, what is permissible, or what might be permissible if certain conditions are satisfied. He quotes back the Creation story – this is perfect life as it should be lived. Only this is ultimately acceptable. Only this should be our aim in life.

There is a time and a place for laws and rules, and we are used to judging what is 'permissible', not serious enough for any sanctions to be applicable, and those situations where external intervention is warranted. And there are also those day to day compromises between two or more people, But the position is very different between us and God. It is so easy to be satisfied with second best, the attitude of 'It will do'. Yes, we fail always to achieve the best, but that not the same as not trying for the best. Hopefully we can learn even from these minor failures and we can then face the next situation with the benefit of our previous experiences. And the important thing for us is always to be looking forward, and, in particular, to set our sights on the 'ideal', the absolutes we find in Jesus' teaching.

Prayers of confession are an essential part of our worship, sometimes because we have done or been responsible for something that we deeply regret, but always as an opportunity to acknowledge in our prayers that we have not attained this ideal, and we are seeking forgiveness to enable us to move forward in the future. And this again is important to keep in mind as we try to move forwards, to know that we have the continuing promise of forgiveness, so that we are not subject to continuing condemnation for what we have done in the past.

So let us commit ourselves anew to Christ's 'all or nothing', and let us set our sights on the 'ideal', with a vision of God's recreation. Amen

## **Prayer**

Heavenly Father,

*You have created us to live in the light, but the eye of the world is darkened, and its spokesmen are the blind who lead the blind.* Statesmen have to make decisions on inadequate information; their judgment is fallible. Crises are averted but there are other storms to come. Even the optimist has his fears for the future. God, let this world see your light shine, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*You have created us to live in harmony, but the tongues of the world clatter, and make our heads ache.* Speeches and counter-speeches confuse us; talks go on; statements are issued, but nothing is

settled; misunderstandings continue, and rival ideologies claim our loyalty even to the clash of war. God, let this world learn one language through Jesus Christ our Lord.

*You have created us to live in peace, but still man lifts his hand against his brother. We try to make amends, but our efforts to establish peace by force do not work out. As nations and as individuals we need you to forgive us and to teach us new ways of peace. God, let each man be his brother's keeper through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen

### **HYMN Singing the Faith 470** (*Timothy Dudley-Smith*)

1. Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,  
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,  
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided,  
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

2. Lord, for that word, the Word of life which fires us,  
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,  
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,  
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

3. Lord, for our land, in this our generation,  
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care;  
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,  
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt him  
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;  
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him,  
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

5. Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,  
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;  
past put behind us, for the future take us,  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

### **The Blessing**

As we seek to follow Christ, setting our sights on the 'ideal', we do so in the confidence that the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit will be with us and those we love throughout the coming days. Amen.

*[Prayers taken and adapted from 'More Contemporary Prayers' published by SCM Press Ltd]*