



New Eltham Methodist Church

A Christian response to uncertainty and conflict

6:00pm, Sunday 17th March 2019

READER 1: Thank you for joining us on this chilly evening, we hope our service brings you both physical and spiritual warmth. Our theme tonight is the Christian response to uncertainty and conflict and, as we consider the state of our nation and the world and the issues that confront them both, we will reflect on the Christian message and how we can use it to bring healing and reconciliation.

Our service includes pauses for silent reflection and we will remain seated throughout, including during the hymns. We will be leading our worship jointly, following this order of service, there will be no introductions. Unless otherwise instructed, words in light type will be read by the readers and words in bold are to be said by us all. Words in italics should not be said at all.

Let us now prepare ourselves for worship and, as we listen to John Rutter's Gaelic blessing, think not of what you cannot change in this world but what, with God's help, you might.

CD: *Opening music; A Gaelic blessing by John Rutter.*

READER 2: Let us pray

A prayer by Anne Peterson, a Christian speaker, poet and author with fourteen books to her name. In the foreword to her memoir 'A story of survival and hope' she says "life is hard and I write words to make it softer".

Father God, we come before you tonight in the hope that you will show us what is true when we are faced with uncertainty. We thank you that there is nothing in our future that is unseen by you and that you do not leave us alone, but are our guide, our strength, and the one who will uphold us.

Give peace, Lord, to those who are unsure of what lies ahead and give us courage to stand beside all those who seek comfort in your name. Thank you for your Son, in whose precious name we pray.

Amen

READER 3: As we begin our exploration let us remind ourselves that we do not journey alone. Wherever and whenever Christians gather together

we are joined in the presence of God. This is the sentiment of our first hymn which is based on Psalm 37, which includes the invitation to “Be still in the presence of the Lord and wait patiently for him to act.”. The hymn was written by David Evans, who has written over 50 others, but none have proved as popular as this one.

HYMN 20: Be still, for the presence of the Lord, by David Evans

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| <p>1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord
The Holy One, is here;
Come bow before him now
with reverence and fear:
In him no sin is found
We stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord
The Holy One, is here.</p> | <p>2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around;
He burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned:
How awesome is the sight,
Our radiant King of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.</p> |
| <p>3. Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place;
He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace:
No work too hard for him,
In faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.</p> | |

READER 4: Oswald Chambers was born in Scotland in 1874 and died in Egypt in 1917, where he was serving as chaplain to British Commonwealth troops during World War I. After his death, the books which bear his name were compiled by his wife from her own verbatim shorthand notes of the talks she had heard him give. This is an extract from his thoughts on 1 John, chapter 3, verse 2, “Now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.”

READER 5: Our natural inclination is always to be so precise - trying always to forecast accurately what will happen next - that we look upon uncertainty as a bad thing. We think fulfilment comes when we reach some predetermined goal, but that is not the nature of a spiritual life. The nature of a spiritual life is that we are certain in our uncertainty. Certainty is the mark of a common-sense life - gracious uncertainty is the mark of a spiritual life. To be certain of God means that we are uncertain in our ways, not knowing what tomorrow may bring.

Uncertainty is certainly a difficult thing to bear but, as Jesus made clear to his disciples, they must be able to bear uncertainty if they are to follow him. As more and more people heard Jesus preach and more and more saw him perform amazing signs and wonders, so Jesus's fame increased and so did the number of his would-be disciples. But what many of these would be followers might not have realised is that, for much of his life, Jesus was homeless. So, when a devotee announced his desire to follow him anywhere, Jesus brought him down to earth by replying, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head".

The Bible doesn't tell us how that person responded, because what's important is not the answer but the question: can you bear uncertainty? Can you bear not knowing how God is going to provide for your most urgent needs and still trust that he will? It is a question that Jesus wants all his disciples to wrestle with. There are simply going to be times when we don't know where the provision is going to come from. Circumstances will look precarious, sometimes foreboding and threatening. Plans are going to fall through. People are going to disappoint us. They may reject or misunderstand our mission. If these things happened to Jesus, we should not be surprised when they happen to us.

But Jesus does not want us to be governed by fear. He wants us governed by faith. Because Christian uncertainty is only *apparent* uncertainty. Our future and our provision and our ultimate triumph are certain to God. In fact, uncertain seasons are often the most powerful

God-moments we experience. They put God on display more than other seasons, demonstrating that God exists and rewards those who seek him. So, if you are in one of those seasons, take heart. You are experiencing what it means to have a God who, as Isaiah said, “acts for those who wait for him”.

READER 3: Oswald directs us to the words of Isaiah, but Isaiah is just one of the Biblical writers to find strength in uncertainty. We are going to read some of them together, with a pause after each one to allow time to consider its meaning. I will read the first and we will then read the remainder together, until the final verse which I shall read alone. We will only read the quotations, the references in italics are for information only or for you to go back to the text on another occasion if you wish.

PAUSE

READER 3: Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.

1 Peter 5:8-10

PAUSE

ALL: I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.

John 16:33

PAUSE

ALL: God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear.

Psalms 46:1-2

PAUSE

ALL: The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

Psalm 18:2

PAUSE

ALL: Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9

PAUSE

ALL: The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him.

Nahum 1:7

PAUSE

ALL: Greater is He who is in you, than he who is in the world.

1 John 4:4

PAUSE

ALL: The Lord gives strength to his people; the Lord blesses his people with peace.

Psalm 29:11

PAUSE

ALL: He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!

Psalm 91:1-2

PAUSE

ALL: The Sovereign Lord is my strength, he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.

Habakkuk 3:19

PAUSE

ALL: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not be troubled and do not be afraid.

John 14:27

PAUSE

ALL: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 4:6-7

PAUSE

READER 3: Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things...and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:8-9

PAUSE

READER 1: The Rev. Rob Frost was the national evangelist for the Methodist Church from 1986 until his untimely death in 2007. In this brief extract from one of his many sermons, he shares his belief that the Christian response in times of adversity must be rooted in hope.

READER 2: Hope is sparked when something of eternity bursts into our fragile lives. For a moment, we lift our eyes from the problems of today and glimpse things as they could be - as they will be.

No matter who we are, or where we live, we are not immune from the tensions, fears, regrets, hopes and dreams of the world in which we live. Human realities of suffering and tragedy confront us in our world, within our communities, in our families and even in our hearts.

Yet, just a few months ago, we were proclaiming the angels' song: 'Glory to God in the Highest and on earth – peace ...' A song that has been sung throughout the ages. It is the song of universal longing for peace and joy, for love and reconciliation ... the age-old hope for things to be as they could be ... as they will be.

A heartbeat of hope beats throughout the Old Testament and the

faith of the people of God who, over more than three millennia, have lived and longed for the world as it could be. God's kingdom of reconciliation, justice and peace. Tracing the heartbeat of hope, we find messages in Hebrew scripture that are interchangeable with the teachings of Christ. So often in this world we see hopes dashed or twisted or lost through lack of time or money. Yet hope, like cheerfulness, keeps breaking back.

The ancient writer of Proverbs noted: 'a cheerful heart has a continual feast' – so, in the awesome knowledge that we are loved, accepted and held in the eternal arms of a loving Father, let us use this unique period to reflect, to refresh and to rejoice and, with cheerful and hopeful hearts, let us see the world, not as it is, but as it might be.

READER 1: Another writer to gain inspiration from Proverbs is Edward Gibson. Edward lives in Plano, Texas and is a regular contributor to online poetry forums. His poem 'Love, Hope and Faith' was uploaded in October 2008. It is a poem which draws on Proverbs 15 and on the concluding passage at the end of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which the Apostle wrote;

READER 3: ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. ¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

'Love, Hope and Faith' by Edward Gibson.

READER 4: We will live tomorrow, the dreams of today
Our hopes for the future give faith on the way
Faith gives us new breath, as it flows through our life
It overcomes loneliness, confusion and strife
Love is free as a river that you cannot restrain
That urges you forward regardless of pain

Hope cuts a clear path, through doubt and despair
It's food for the Spirit, its urges you dare
Faith is a power that can't be taken away
It can keep your heart beating when dark is the day
Love keeps you going when everything fails
And keeps your heart warm on the coldest of trails
Hope is ever daring in the face of defeat
It brings you courage that nothing can beat
Faith is never doubting in yourself or belief
The knowledge you know brings its own relief
Love is like a river, hope is like a dream
Faith is just believing with nothing to be seen
Hope gives you strength to face whatever may be
With faith and with love, you need only these three
So, dream of tomorrow and love for today
Hope with your heart, faith shows you the way

READER 2: Edward's poem uses the sentiment of love, hope and faith that feature in many of Paul's letters to the ancient church. But, in his use of the phrase 'love like a river', his poem also draws on African-American spiritual traditions as in the spiritual song 'Peace Like a River'. Spirituals began in the age of slavery and were sung in the fields partly to relieve the hardship of the work and partly to maintain cultural identity. Slaves were forbidden to speak their native languages and, with narrow local vocabularies, spirituals gave them a means of mass communication. It is also thought that the stories of the Old Testament, like Moses leading the Israelites out of bondage, gave slaves a hope for a better life. As we listen to the singing of this spiritual, we invite you to close your eyes and to silently pray that love, hope and faith leads us and our world to a better future.

CD: *'Peace like a River' sung by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.*

READER 3: The Rev. John Monsell was a prolific hymn writer who wrote more than 300 hymns. He was born in Londonderry in 1811 and died in 1875 after being hit by a stone which fell from the roof of St Nicholas' Church in Guildford, while he was inspecting the building work he was overseeing. There may be a warning there for our Redevelopment Committee. Monsell's work will be well known to past members of the Church Lads Brigade, who used our next hymn as their anthem. It was inspired by the line in 1 Timothy 6:12 which says, "Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called" and continues our theme that trust in God will sustain us whatever the adversity.

HYMN 634: *Fight the good fight, by John Samuel Bewley Monsell*

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| <p>1. Fight the good fight with all
your might,
Christ is your strength and
Christ your right;
Lay hold on life and it shall
be,
Your joy and crown
eternally.</p> | <p>2. Run the straight race
through God's good grace,
Lift up your eyes and see
his face;
Life with its way before you
lies,
Christ is the path and
Christ the prize.</p> |
| <p>3. Cast care aside upon your
guide,
Lean and his mercy will
provide;
Lean and the trusting soul
shall prove,
Christ is its life and Christ
its love.</p> | <p>4. Faint not nor fear, his arm
is near,
He changes not, and you
are dear;
Only believe and prove it
true,
That Christ is all in all to
you.</p> |

READER 4: It would be impossible to reflect upon the uncertainties facing the world without making at least a passing reference to Brexit and Donald Trump. For Brexit we turn to Tim Hutchings, a Researcher at the Institute for Media Studies at Stockholm University and a sociologist of religion. He has spoken on Premier Radio on how

Christians should respond to Brexit and this is an extract from one of his radio reflections entitled 'God, Brexit and the Right to be Angry'.

READER 5: Right now, whichever way you voted. emotions are running high. Is it OK to be angry or is it time to move on?

According to a poll conducted on behalf of Premier in the weeks following the Referendum, 58% of Christians said they voted to leave the EU and 63% of Christians said they thought immigration was a 'force for ill'. Despite many of the UK's Christian leaders arguing that the EU kept us safe, secure, peaceful and prosperous, it seems that most of their followers not only disagreed but chose to ignore their advice. Christianity in the UK no longer speaks with one voice. It is split, confused, scared of the future and fighting with itself - much like the rest of the country - and little seems to have changed since.

If you're a Christian remain voter and you really think the UK has made an appalling mistake that will have terrible consequences and that voters have been lied to by deceitful politicians, then you are likely to believe you have every right to be angry. If you're a Christian leave voter and you think the government is ignoring the will of the people and that a metropolitan elite - insulated from austerity - is dismissing you as stupid or racist, then you are likely to believe you have every right to be angry too. But, though it's sometimes right to be angry, not all anger is right. So, what would Jesus do?

Jesus might have been the Prince of Peace, but he also knew how to get mad and his outbursts against corruption, hypocrisy and bad leadership were reported in great detail by his disciples. We've heard a lot of arguments from the UK's political parties these past few months, but no one has actually made a whip and driven their opponents out of the House of Commons (well not yet, anyway).

Jesus showed that anger can sometimes be the right response, but he was often also the first to call for peace and reconciliation. He taught that peace without justice is not peace at all and a just peace requires everyone to see the world from another's point of view.

There was once a dour gentleman, who found himself seated on a train between two ladies arguing about the window. One claimed that she would die of heatstroke if it stayed closed and the other said she would expire of pneumonia if it was opened. The ladies called the guard, who didn't know how to resolve the conflict, so the gentleman spoke up. "First, open the window", he said, "that will kill one. Then close it and that will kill the other. Then we shall have peace." Peace for him maybe, but hardly the peace that passes all understanding.

Jesus was the bringer of peace and the teacher of forgiveness, the one who told us to turn the other cheek. If he were here now, would he not say that Christians should be the first to lay down their anger and start working to bring the country back together again? I think he would and I also think I know how he would go about starting it.

All too often we socialise with people who think like us and share our values, because those are the people we most want to be with. That makes it easy for opinions to move quickly around the world, travelling through an echo chamber of people who already agree with each other. Social media is the perfect technology for this, it's a machine for multiplying emotions and it works by isolating us from people and from those complicated encounters that might make all difference.

Jesus didn't have to contend with social media, but he did confront bigotry, prejudice and intolerance and he did it by spending time with people who were the opposite of himself. He touched lepers, he dined with tax collectors and he told positive stories about people and races that others despised. If Jesus was a remainer, he would have dined with leavers, if Jesus was a leaver he would have engaged with remainers. Whatever side of the road he was on, he would have crossed over to the other side and, in crossing over, he would have changed the world.

So, here's my advice to both Christian remainers and Christian leavers. Be angry, if you must. Fight for what you believe, if you have to. But recognise that what you hear from those around you will never be the whole story. Listen as well to people you might not

expect to agree with, meet with people you might not expect to like, engaged with people whose views you despise and maybe, just maybe, like Jesus you can be part of building something new.

READER 1: Tim says that the Christian response to conflict should be Jesus's response. As followers of Christ, we do not have the option to pass by on the other side and, in our prayers, we urge God to help us to follow Jesus' example. We will read the words in bold type together.

Let us pray.

A prayer for 'Uncertain Times' by Nancy Wolgemuth, an American feminist theologian whose books have sold more than three million copies around the world.

READER 1: Seasons of adversity - economic or otherwise - do not catch God off guard. He knows everything that is going on in our world. He also knows what lies ahead. Our response to turbulent times is too often determined by our perspective and where we feel at home, but people should be able to look at Christians and see a response to pressure that is distinctly different.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to look outward not inward and forward not back, and to follow Jesus' example in all we say and do.

Lean times can be a means of God's chastening - both personally and globally. Contentment flows out of believing that God has provided everything we need for the present moment and that He will provide all we need in the future.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to be content with what we have and secure in what will be.

Times of economic hardship or loss expose what matters most and what we really love. They provide the antidote to our tendency to accumulate stuff we don't need and an encouragement to be sensitive to those around us, who may have even greater needs than your own.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to reach out to others and to see their needs as more important than our own.

God uses adversity to show us what is in our hearts, to purify us, and to deepen our dependence on Him. Seasons of leanness can prove to be times of great blessing, as people are stripped of self-reliance and their hearts are turned toward the Lord.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to see your purpose for the world and for your help as we work to fulfil it.

The natural tendency in times of financial uncertainty is to hold on to what we have and to give less to others. But, in doing so, we miss the opportunity to demonstrate the greatness and power of God through our giving.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to practice Christ-like giving of our money and ourselves.

God knows what we are facing. These circumstances have not caught Him off guard. He is still on His throne and accomplishing His purposes in our lives and in the world. Trust Him to meet your needs and He will provide. Now is a time to see what God can do.

ALL: Father God, we pray for the strength and confidence to place our trust in you.

Amen

READER 2: Nancy's prayer urges us to see the solution to life's ills not in God's hands, but in our own and asks God to help us better do his work. Have you heard his call? As we listen to the Prayer of Saint Francis, we invite you to close your eyes and to silently pray that God gives you the strength and confidence to do whatever he desires.

CD: *'Make me a channel of your peace' by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.*

READER 2: And as our Saviour taught his disciples, let us say together:

**ALL: Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy Name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,**

**On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those that trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom,
The power, and the glory,
For ever and ever.
Amen.**

READER 3: Maya Angelou was born in 1928 and died in 2014. A poet, singer, memoirist, and civil rights activist, she received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees, but is best known for her series of autobiographies, which focused on her childhood and early adult experiences. Though she died two years before the election of President Trump, such was the commanding passion of her words that, on the morning after his election, the Huffington Post chose to print her poem 'Still I Rise' on its front page. It was preceded by the following brief introduction.

READER 4: From the Huffington Post, 9th November 2016. Today much of the country joins together in collective shock, disbelief, anger and fear after Donald Trump was declared the winner of the 2016 election early on Wednesday morning. For women, people of colour and LGBTQ communities, it's especially hard to fathom that we live in a country where we are regarded by so many as less than them.

At this point, the present is hard to comprehend, and the future is terrifying to imagine and yet we must find ways to remain hopeful and remember what makes this country good. As President Barack Obama said in his speech on Wednesday: "We must go forward with a presumption of good faith in our fellow citizens. Because that presumption of good faith is essential to a vibrant and functioning democracy."

The following poem reminds us of the progress we have made as a nation, how much we have overcome in the past, and how much more work we have yet to do. May its words help you mourn, cope and fight, today and going forward.

READER 5: Though written for the American Civil Rights Movement, Angelou's poem depicts faith in the face of persecution and a belief that one day all will rise, a sentiment that could equally be applied to Christians through the ages, to Christians now and to all those who feel marginalised and suppressed today. In her allusion to Jesus rising from the grave, Angelou inspires us to believe that, no matter what we fear, no matter what we suffer, no matter what divides us in thought, word or deed, at the final homecoming, all will rise.

READER 5: You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may tread me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room?
Just like moons and just like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Like the hopes of guiltless children,
Still you'll see me rise.

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Weakened by my soulful cries?
No, you'll see me rise.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of history's shame, I rise
 From a past rooted in pain, I rise
 Like a black and restless ocean, proud and wide
 I live by the gifts that my ancestors gave,
 I am the dream and the hope of the slave,
 My final home will not be the grave.
 I rise
 I rise
 I rise.

READER 1: Our final hymn was written by Mary Peters, who was born in 1813 and, while still very young, married John Peters, the vicar of Langford in Oxfordshire. The death of her husband, in 1834, left her a widow at the age of 21 and she found solace in the writing of hymns and other literary pursuits. Though she herself died at the age of 43, by then she had found time to write more than fifty memorable hymns including our final one. "All will be well", could as easily be a cry for complacency as it is a call to action, but we have chosen it for its message that, no matter what confronts us, if we confide in God, if we abide in Christ and if we are guided by His Holy Spirit, all will be well.

HYMN 639: *All will be well*, by Mary Peters

<p> 1. Through the love of God our Saviour All will be well Free and changeless is his favour All, all is well. Precious is the blood that healed us Perfect is the grace that sealed us Strong the hand stretched forth to shield us All must be well. </p>	<p> 2. Though we pass through tribulation All will be well Christ has purchased full salvation All, all is well. Happy still in God confiding Fruitful if in Christ abiding Holy, through the Spirit's guiding All must be well. </p>
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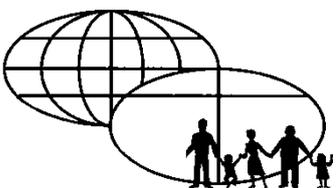
**3. We expect a bright
tomorrow
All will be well
Faith can sing through days
of sorrow
All, all is well.
On our father's love relying
Jesus every need supplying
Then in living and in dying
All must be well.**

READER 2: And finally, let us say together

**ALL: God, in whom there is no darkness
with whom the night is as the day;
enlighten us by your presence,
that waking or sleeping we may dwell in your peace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord
Amen.**

A final moment of silence and peace.

CD: *Closing music; Thou gracious God, whose mercy lends.*



New Eltham Methodist Church
www.newelthammethodist.org.uk