

SERMON AT 11.00 AM HOLY COMMUNION (CW)
FLOWER FESTIVAL AT CHRIST CHURCH, TOTLAND
BAY ON SUNDAY 20TH AUGUST 2017 (10TH SUNDAY
AFTER TRINITY) BY JAMES COOK

Readings: Romans 11.1-2a, 29-32 and Matthew 15.10-28

How wonderful it is to have a Festival. This weekend's Festival of Flowers provides us with a marvellous opportunity to celebrate the natural beauty of flowers and the human gifts of art expressed in the arranging of flowers. On behalf of us all, I thank the members of the West Wight Floral Arts Society for providing the floral displays that surround us. We also thank the other flower arrangers who have joined the Society members in this event and we thank the musicians, singers, cake-makers and tea-pot pourers for making this weekend such a lovely occasion.

Against each flower arrangement has been placed a card showing the title, the name of the arranger and a Bible verse related to the title. Please take time not only to admire each wonderful arrangement, but also to think about the person who created it and to ponder the Biblical message that is being conveyed.

The Bible opens with the words 'In the beginning God...', for in the beginning there was God and we believe that

he created everything including plants, animals and human beings.

By their selfish and sinful ways, men and women spoiled God's creation from the outset. The Bible is the story of how, through acts of selfless love, God endeavours to cleanse and restore human beings to the state of eternal happiness that he intended for us.

The display by Eryl Jennings reminds us of the great flood, when a small number of humans and animals were saved from destruction and given the chance to start again – to multiply, two by two.

The cycle of godless behaviour, resulting in punishment and the need for forgiveness and restoration was, however, to continue. When Lot's wife looked back, longing for the old life of sin, she was turned by a volcanic eruption into a pillar of salt. Christine Plent portrays the enormity and tragedy of the event.

Having saved Lot from the same fate, Abraham, whose faith God reckoned as righteousness, set about finding a wife for his late-born and much loved son Isaac. God's choice for Isaac was the gracious Rebecca, whose beauty Jan smith has shown us in flowers.

Rebecca was the grandmother of Joseph the dreamer, whose colourful coat has been represented for us so strikingly by Sue Clarke. The story of Joseph's transportation to a foreign land, of imprisonment, release and rise to power makes such good theatre that Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat launched the musical career of Andrew Lloyd-Webber.

Joseph's family grew eventually into the Hebrew nation, which was enslaved by the people of Egypt; but God provided them a deliverer. He was Moses, hidden as a baby in the reeds at the edge of the River Nile from those who sought to kill him. Betty Phillips has given us the child and a beautiful scene at the riverside.

The Hebrew nation became known by the name of Joseph's father Israel, and Moses led the Children of Israel to the Promised Land. There, in time, they were to become a powerful nation, united under King David. Joan Horn has reminded us in her display that David was not only a brave warrior but also a gifted musician who gave us many of our Psalms, including the much-loved 23rd Psalm.

The Nation of Israel remained united under David's son, Solomon, whose wisdom and great wealth is portrayed to us by Anne Gradwell and Lynne Acketts – we can see the

gold and the jewels that come from Solomon's legendary mines.

Solomon and the Nation of Israel that he rules on God's behalf lose their love of God, and they fall into idolatry and corruption. Through his prophets, God warns his people that, unless they return to him, they will be conquered and led off into slavery once more. Joel warns that invading armies, like plagues of locusts, will lay waste their land. This awful prospect is fearfully depicted in John Baldwin's barren landscape.

The Prophet Jonah is sent to warn the people of Nineveh – in modern Iraq – that they too must repent. At first, Jonah refuses to go and finds himself in the belly of a great fish. The story becomes legendary as 'Jonah and the Whale' – wonderfully told in picture form by Pat Russell. Unlike Israel, the people of Nineveh do take notice.

The divided Nation of Israel – now Israel and Judah – is carried into captivity in Babylon. There the people re-learn the lesson of faithfulness to God. One of their number, the wise and brave Daniel, is prepared to face the lion's den, rather than put anyone before God. I am sure that the real lions were much more terrifying than the one whose face Ann Jennings shows us so cleverly in flowers.

The prophets are often rejected by the people, and so God sends his Son Jesus to show us God's love. Jesus calls us all to follow him, beginning with his call to Peter the fisherman and his friends. Pam England and Beryl Adamson help us to imagine the scene by the Sea of Galilee.

In his first miracle, Jesus demonstrates his deity by turning water into wine. For us, Suzanne Cook turns white flowers into red.

Jesus teaches us not to be anxious about life, because God loves and cares for us. Even the royal robes of King Solomon cannot match the beauty of the lilies, as Phil Lawrence and Gina Soames show us so clearly.

Ann Cook and Jean Smith present us a panorama, which has just five loaves and two fishes. With these, Jesus feeds 5,000 Jewish men, plus women and children.

Later, as Selina Flint, reminds us, Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentile men, again plus women and children, this time with only seven loaves and a few fish.

Zacchaeus, the despised tax collector, accepts the invitation to come and eat with Jesus. By so doing, the life of Zacchaeus is transformed into something beautiful – like the flower arrangement by Joyce Bone.

The life and teachings of Jesus are attractive, but the authorities feel challenged and are ready to act. With a sense of foreboding, Jesus and his disciples share their last supper – bread and wine to remind us, week-by-week, of the sacrifice for sins that Jesus makes on our behalf. Ann Cook and Jean Smith decorate the pulpit with symbols of this Last Supper, reminding us that the message of Christ’s sacrificial love is to be preached. The message calls for our response.

The stark truth and the agony of the crucifixion of Jesus are portrayed in the subtle beauty and mystery of Georgina Gosden’s arrangement. His death is not the end, for Jesus rises from the tomb on the third day, just as the Prophet Jonah was ejected on the third day from the belly of the great fish.

For forty days, the resurrected Jesus continues to teach and feed his disciples until he ascends to his rightful place in heaven, from which he will return one day to judge the world. Ten days after the Ascension, the Holy Spirit descends upon the followers of Jesus at the Jewish festival of Pentecost. Helen Hunt and Chris Johnson show us in flowers the flames of the Holy Spirit’s Pentecost power.

Elisabeth Heeley symbolises in white flowers the cleansing power that the Holy Spirit brings into our lives.

The message of the Gospel is now to be proclaimed throughout the world: sins forgiven through faith in the cross of Jesus Christ and empowering for God's service through receiving the Holy Spirit. Saul, the strict Jew becomes Paul, missionary to the Gentiles. Scilla Rolison and Barbara Woods capture the man, converted on the road to Damascus in flowers and Jewish symbols at the foot of our Communion Table.

The salvation story told in flowers concludes for today with Beryl Jeffery's image of Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. The Bible tells us that 'the Lord opened her heart to respond to God's message'. May the Lord Jesus likewise open our hearts today. Amen.