

**East Durham Methodist Circuit:**

**Service 20<sup>th</sup> March**

**Prepared by Rev Alf Waite**

**Theme: Playing the Fool.**

**Call to Worship:**

The heavens proclaim the glory of God. The skies display His craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make Him known. They speak without a sound or word; their voice is never heard. The instructions of the LORD are perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

**Hymn: Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice** Matt Redman **StF 274**

1. Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice;  
you became nothing, poured out to death.  
Many times I've wondered at your gift of life,  
and I'm in that place once again,  
I'm in that place once again.

**And once again I look upon the cross where you died.  
I'm humbled by your mercy and I'm broken inside.  
Once again I thank you,  
once again I pour out my life.**

2. Now you are exalted to the highest place,  
King of the heavens, where one day I'll bow.  
But for now I marvel at this saving grace,  
and I'm full of praise once again,  
I'm full of praise once again. **And once again...**

**Prayer of Adoration:**

Children as leaders, last as first and first as last, dying to live it all sounds more than a little absurd; Turning the other cheek, loving enemies, carrying a cross it's all pretty foolish, Jesus;

**But what is foolish to us is power and glory to you!**

We praise you for the foolishness of a Promised Land that is found right where we are;

We praise you for the foolishness of a message that makes sense only to those who are willing to become like children;

We praise you for the foolishness of a mission that overturns the tables of the powerful and disrupts the business of the wealthy.

**And we praise you, Jesus, for inviting us into this playful, foolish, liberating reality.**

**Amen**

## **Prayers of Confession:**

This matter of living is serious business, Jesus.

We have responsibilities and commitments, we have systems and structures, and we don't want to mess with them, for fear that everything will collapse, or that we'll find they're not really as important as we think.

**Forgive us when we get so caught up in our own serious lives, that we miss your foolish dream, and end up robbing ourselves and others of life.**

Make your own silent confession now...

Thank you, Jesus, for being foolish enough to love the likes of us, and for being always so ready to forgive the proud seriousness that keeps us from Your grace. **Amen**

We join our prayer together as we say the Lord's prayer:

**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 who 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**

**Reading:                      Exodus 20:1-17.                      New International Version**

And God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. <sup>3</sup> "You shall have no other gods before me.

<sup>4</sup> "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup> but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

<sup>7</sup> "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

<sup>8</sup> "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labour and do all your work, <sup>10</sup> but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns. <sup>11</sup> For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

<sup>12</sup> "Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

<sup>13</sup> "You shall not murder.

<sup>14</sup> "You shall not commit adultery.

<sup>15</sup> “You shall not steal.

<sup>16</sup> “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.

<sup>17</sup> “You shall not covet your neighbour’s house. You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.”

**Hymn:**            **Break Thou the Bread of Life**    Lathbury/Groves            **StF 153 / H&P 467**

1. Break Thou the Bread of Life, dear  
Lord, to me,  
As Thou didst break the loaves beside  
the sea;  
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee,  
Lord;  
My spirit pants for Thee,  
O Living Word.

3. Oh, send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto  
me,  
That He may touch my eyes, and make  
me see;  
Show me the truth concealed within Thy  
Word,  
And in Thy Book revealed  
I see the Lord.

2. Thou art the Bread of Life, O Lord, to  
me,  
Thy holy Word the truth that saveth me;  
Give me to eat and live with Thee  
above;  
Teach me to love Thy truth,  
For Thou art Love.

4. Bless Thou the truth, dear Lord, to  
me, to me,  
As Thou didst bless the bread by  
Galilee;  
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters  
fall,  
And I shall find my peace,  
My All in all.

**Reading:**            **John 2:13-22**            New International Version

<sup>13</sup> When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup> In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. <sup>15</sup> So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup> To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!” <sup>17</sup> His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.”

<sup>18</sup> The Jews then responded to him, “What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” <sup>19</sup> Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

<sup>20</sup> They replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” <sup>21</sup> But the temple he had spoken of was his body. <sup>22</sup> After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

**Message:**

### **Playing The Fool**

Have you ever done the ‘right’ thing and found out afterwards that it was wrong? In South Africa in the early nineteen nineties, there was tremendous anger and outrage

within the Dutch Reformed Church, which had provided the theological underpinnings of the apartheid system, when the leaders publicly apologised on behalf of their entire denomination for what they had come to recognise as the heresy of apartheid. Many of the people of this denomination were deeply hurt because they felt that they had been betrayed by their leaders. They had been told that one way of being was right before God, and now, after decades, they were being told that it had been wrong all along. It was a difficult time for many South Africans, but it was necessary for us to begin the journey to unity and democracy that still continues today.

On the other hand, sometimes doing the 'wrong' thing can be absolutely right. As anyone who has heard of Corrie Ten Boom knows, in World War Two it was illegal to harbour Jews from the Nazi regime. Yet, Corrie and her family did this, even building a hidden room in their home to house their illegal guests. They frequently lied to Nazi soldiers who were searching for Jewish fugitives and denied any knowledge of their Jewish guests.

Legally, and for those who would value telling the truth above all else, what this family did was wrong. But, from the perspective of justice, grace, and the Reign of God, what they did was utterly right. In a similar way, 'rebels' have often risen up illegally against tyranny, groups of people have occupied public spaces in protest, and online advocacy groups have mobilised ordinary people to stand against their own lawmakers - all for the cause of justice. Many of these actions would be labelled, especially by those in power, as wrong. But, while there have almost certainly been opportunists and vigilantes who have used these situations for their own destructive ends, most people across the world would see the quest for freedom from tyranny as something that is very, very right.

Those who buck the system like this are often called fools, especially by those who are being challenged by their subversion. But history shows that it is usually the fools who end up being the liberators! There have been many such fools - Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas K. Gandhi - and their positive impact on the world has been overwhelming. There is a proud history of fools in human affairs - those who alone are able to speak truth to power, bring the needed change, and help humanity find a new way of being.

Moses was such a fool, standing alone before Pharaoh commanding him to let God's people go. And Jesus was such a fool, standing against both the might of Rome and the authority of the religious leaders proclaiming the Reign of God that would outlast them both. Christian singer/songwriter Michael Card has expressed this "foolishness" of Jesus in a profound song called "**God's Own Fool**":

**When we in our foolishness thought we were wise  
He played the fool and He opened our eyes  
When we in our weakness believed we were strong  
He became helpless to show we were wrong**

**So we follow God's own Fool  
For only the foolish can tell  
Believe the unbelievable  
Come be a fool as well<sup>1</sup>**

---

<sup>1</sup>

The challenge of this Lenten journey, as we seek the Promised Land of God's Reign for ourselves and our world, is for us to embrace the foolishness of Christ, and, as Michael Card puts it, "Come be a fool as well". There can be no question, as we delve deeper into the truth that is God's Reign that it requires a large helping of foolishness to know it and live it.

## **A Fool's Realm**

The first glimpses of the foolish potential of God's Reign coming among human beings is found when Moses, having liberated his people from their slavery in Egypt, brings them to the foot of the mountain of God - Sinai, the same place where God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:12).

The first step God takes in transforming this group of slaves into a nation, is to give them a set of directives, in Hebrew, literally the "Ten Words". These commandments are a simple but clear picture of what the life of a liberated, God-honouring people should look like.

The first four are intended to teach them to love God and find freedom from the false gods they have known, the Egyptian idols and Pharaohs who claim to be god but oppress and enslave people.

The last six are intended to teach them to love one another, free from family breakdown, murder, theft, and jealousy. The picture they are given in these ten words is of an alternative way of being that is different from what they have known in Egypt, different, in fact, from every human system.

At its heart, this list of commandments is foolish because it is based on love, which is, from the perspective of human systems of power and wealth, a deeply foolish thing. Love is sacrificial, generous, extravagant, selfless, simple, and vulnerable. This group of slaves, carried out of Egypt by God, were to become a nation whose foundation was the foolishness of God's Realm of love.

But it's much harder to get Egypt out of the slaves than it is to get the slaves out of Egypt. Centuries later these liberating words have become a burden and a means of oppression, control, and exploitation by the powerful few. Rather than transform the slaves into an alternative community, the centuries have seen the slaves, or at least their leaders, turn the law into a new Egypt.

The sacrificial system was now the source of great wealth for those who were connected enough. Blemish free animals could only be bought within the temple itself at a premium (or at least that's how it ended up, since most animals brought in from outside were declared unclean for some reason). Only temple currency could be used in the temple, and the exchange rate was not favourable for the poor folk who had to change their regular money in order to pay for their sacrifices. According to Richard Rohr, 90% of Jerusalem's economy at the time of Christ was based on this corrupt system which fleeced the poor but lined the pockets of the priests and their cronies. And it was God's law that was used to maintain this state of affairs that was far more like Egypt than the Promised Land.

All of which explains why Jesus marched in and overturned it all, throwing the vendors and money changers out of the temple. He chooses the time of Passover, with all of its reminders of the liberation from Egypt, to demonstrate how far the people have fallen

from the ideal that God had intended for his free, alternative people. Cleansing the temple was a foolish act, which results in a rather foolish conversation with the religious leaders who come to see what was going on.

When they ask him for a sign to prove that he has the authority to do what he has just done - a Messianic act that they were not going to tolerate without very good reason - he tells them that if they destroy the temple, he will rebuild it again in three days. It's a classic fool's riddle. They can't risk destroying their own temple in order to prove his claims, because if they're false, they will have demolished the centre of their religious and national life. But they can't afford not to, because then they cannot disprove his claims.

But there is a dark twinkle in Jesus' eye because he knows, as they don't, that they *will* destroy a temple. In John's Gospel, there is a strong link between Jesus and the Temple, with a clear indication that Jesus fulfils the purposes of both the Temple, and all of its sacrificial activities.

The incarnation is described as the Word 'tabernacling' among us (John 1:14). At the call of Nathaniel, Jesus says that the disciples will see the angels of God ascending and descending on himself (John 1:51). And here, the Gospel writer makes it clear that the Temple Jesus was referring to was his own body - which would be raised again after three days when he was resurrected. Later, in Chapter Three, the foolishness of this conversation and the events in Jerusalem have become so compelling that Nicodemus, one of the religious leaders, comes to Jesus, sneaking around at night, to discuss these matters further.

Jesus, entering the Temple, plays the fool because that's the only way we can ultimately find liberation. The only way to get Egypt of the heart is to overturn the heart so completely that it is completely emptied. The only way to undermine a system of oppression and slavery is to play with it foolishly and live alternatively. It's looks foolish, even for those who live after the resurrection. Paul, in the letter set for today, calls the message of Christ foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) because it's living as a citizen of one reality, while still situated in another. It's 'playing' at God's Reign right under Pharaoh's throne. It's singing the Lord's song while sitting under the willows of Babylon!

### **The Need For Fools**

It doesn't take much to recognise that the world today still has far too much of Egypt in it, and not enough of the foolish Reign of God. The world needs to change, to lose its serious addiction to oppression and consumption and war and embrace the foolishness of love for God and neighbour. If we fail to find a way to become fools, we may well, very seriously, destroy ourselves.

Not long after the 2012 US election, I read an article about a new initiative that was launched by a man called Mark DeMoss, a Christian and a Republican, along with his friend, Lanny J. Davis, a Jewish Democrat. The Civility Project was intended to address the increasing vitriol that DeMoss was observing in political discourse in America and asked 585 governors and members of congress to sign a very simple pledge to be civil in public discourse and behaviour, to be respectful of others whether

in agreement or not, and to stand against incivility whenever it was seen. DeMoss decided to close down the project when only three members of Congress agreed to sign. Who would have thought that a simple request for civility would be seen as foolish? But it seems in this Egyptian system, in which our world is stuck, it is.

The good news is that the Egyptian system is in decline, and more and more people are beginning to see it. We live in the age of the fool, and the Lenten journey is an invitation to become part of it. But living like a fool may not be as easy as it seems at first. It starts with letting go of whatever investments we might still have in Egypt and to stop longing for the things of this world and its systems. Then, it means embracing and living according to the simple, but difficult, laws of liberation - to love God with everything you've got and to love your neighbour (or your enemy, as Jesus would foolishly put it) as you love yourself.

### **It's Not About Geography**

God made a promise to Moses and to the people of Israel: a Promised Land where they could belong, find safety, and live as free people, not slaves. But the one thing that they missed - and that we all still miss - is that the Promised Land is not about geography. It's about living in a new community, with an alternative way of being that is built on love for God and one another. And, as naive and foolish as this might sound, it is this Reign of God that is the doorway to peace, justice, joy, and abundance.

You may want to laugh the whole idea off as ridiculous because it seems unrelated to the world you know. Or you may choose to risk making a fool of yourself and believe that this alternative reality actually can be realised in your own life. You may decide to try and learn to love a life of playing the fool and seek to step out of the serious business of maintaining the systems of power and wealth and war on which all Empire relies. You may decide to experiment in simple practical ways with loving God in gatherings and acts of worship that others will tell you are foolish and outdated. You may decide to experiment with loving others through the foolish practices of generosity, forgiveness, contentment, and peace-making.

If you make this choice, you will discover that you're not the only one. There is a whole community of fools who have chosen to follow God's Own Fool into the Promised Land. We'd be so happy if you decided to join us!

### **Hymn:**

**I cannot tell**

W Y Fullerton

**StF 350 / H&P 238**

1. I cannot tell why He Whom angels worship,  
Should set His love upon the sons of men,  
Or why, as Shepherd, He should seek the wanderers,  
To bring them back, they know not how or when.  
But this I know, that He was born of Mary  
When Bethlehem's manger was His only home,  
And that He lived at Nazareth and laboured,  
And so the Saviour, Saviour of the world is come.

2. I cannot tell how silently He suffered,  
As with His peace He graced this place of tears,  
Or how His heart upon the cross was broken,

The crown of pain to three and thirty years.  
But this I know, He heals the broken-hearted,  
And stays our sin, and calms our lurking fear,  
And lifts the burden from the heavy laden,  
For yet the Saviour, Saviour of the world is here.

3. I cannot tell how He will win the nations,  
How He will claim His earthly heritage,  
How satisfy the needs and aspirations  
Of East and West, of sinner and of sage.  
But this I know, all flesh shall see His glory,  
And He shall reap the harvest He has sown,  
And some glad day His sun shall shine in splendour  
When He the Saviour, Saviour of the world is known.

4. I cannot tell how all the lands shall worship,  
When, at His bidding, every storm is stilled,  
Or who can say how great the jubilation  
When all the hearts of men with love are filled.  
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,  
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,  
And earth to Heaven, and Heaven to earth, will answer:  
At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world is King

### **Prayers of Intercession:**

We take ourselves so seriously, God as if we are the ones who really control our destiny and hold the world in our hands; And it is this serious arrogance that brings so much pain into our world. And so we pray:

For leaders in every sphere to have the humility to share power and to collaborate with those they serve.

For educators of every age to have the wisdom to keep learning and to favour formation over information.

For healers of every kind to have the sensitivity to listen and to treat people, not just diseases.

For protectors in every situation to have the grace to see the humanity even in enemies and always to make peace the first priority.

For lovers in every family to have the courage to lose themselves and to risk love's call to selfless sacrifice.

In every corner of our world, may we learn again the foolishness of laughter and celebration, the foolishness of play and levity, the foolishness of making mistakes and forgiving.

And so may we become, a little more each day, true citizens of your foolish Reign.

**Amen**



**Hymn:        The Lord Of The Dance**

1. I danced in the morning when the world was begun,  
I dance in the moon and the stars and the sun,  
I came down from Heaven and I danced on earth,  
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

**Dance then, wherever you may be,  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he,  
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,  
And I'll lead you all in the dance, said he.**

2. I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,  
They would not dance, they wouldn't follow me.  
So I danced for the fishermen,  
James and John came with me and the dance went on. **Dance then...**

3. I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame,  
The Holy people said it was a shame.  
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high,  
Left me there on a cross to die. **Dance then...**

4. I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black,  
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.  
They buried my body, they thought I'd gone,  
But I am the dance, and I still go on. **Dance then...**

5. They cut me down, but I lept up high.  
I am the light that will never ever die  
And I'll live in you if you'll live in me.  
I am the Lord of the dance, said he. **Dance then...**

**Benediction:**

God of joy and play and dancing and laughter, you have called us to follow a message that for so many is foolishness,  
We go now to live as fools for the sake of your Kingdom, and for the joy of our world.  
**Amen.**