

Methodist Homes MHA Sunday Service 2021

Call to worship: Psalm 46:7-11

Hymn: (Singing the Faith 55) Immortal, Invisible, God Only
Wise



Introduction

Today is Methodist Homes (MHA) Sunday and it is an opportunity to give thanks and reflect on the support given to over 18,500 older people through MHA's care homes, retirement living schemes and MHA Communities schemes. It has been an incredibly challenging year for MHA as it has for many others. There has been an outpouring of prayers and support from the church community to MHA and that has really encouraged and helped MHA's staff, volunteers, residents and members. Thank you.

Part of MHA's vision is for people to find meaning and hope in later life and to tackle loneliness and isolation. MHA seek do to this through their chaplaincy service, providing spiritual for the happy and the darkest of times, music therapy helping people living with dementia and community groups partnering with the church to reach out in to our neighbourhoods tackling loneliness and isolation through MHA Communities. All of this has continued throughout the pandemic, and now a new digital service is offered, MHA Digital Communities, to connect people into a virtual community wherever they are – providing wellbeing, friendship groups, spiritual and religious care.

Our theme today is relieving loneliness and bringing hope.

Share video of Anthony and Tanya (mha.org.uk/Sunday) or tell the story.

(Optional children and youth resources available at mha.org.uk/Sunday that could be adapted for a children's address)

Opening prayers

- Adoration

God of all, we praise you for your loving presence with us through good times and difficult times. You know each of us by name and call us into communion with you and one another. Throughout Jesus' ministry on earth you welcomed the outsiders, your love is for all people and knows no bounds. You showed your ultimate love by coming amongst us as one of us, leaving behind all heavenly splendour to experience the joys and hurts, highs and lows, laughter and tears, hopes and disappointments. Yet you remained obedient and full of love, and lived, served and died for us. You were raised from the dead and offer us everlasting life. And so we declare your holiness, majesty and beauty that radiates from all that is around us. And we with all creation shout praise to you. Glory, power and praise be given to you O God.

- Confession

As we recognise your goodness and love, all that you have given to us, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, your continued presence through your Holy Spirit, we recall in our minds the things we do, think and say that fall short of all that you call us to be.

As we reflect on loneliness and isolation, we ask for your forgiveness in the way that your church has contributed to others feeling un-welcome in our midst. We confess the things that we haven't done which could have helped others feel more included. We offer our confession for the ways in which people still exist on the margins.

Silence

Lord forgive us, and renew us in the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you.

- Thanksgiving

We give thanks for your faithfulness to us. For the outpouring of your love and grace and for all that you have promised to us. For your love that has guided us through life, and will continue to be with us. We give thanks for communities where all are included and made to feel welcome. We thank you that you call us to be part of your Kingdom in the here and now. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

Hymn: (Singing the Faith 611) Brother, Sister, Let Me Serve You

Reading: Mark 5:1-20

Sermon

Offertory Hymn: (Singing the Faith 608) All Praise to our Redeeming Lord (*offering taken now for the work of MHA or alternatively a retiring collection*)

Prayers of Intercession

Include prayers for those in your own community who are lonely or isolated or both.

This prayer is offered by Les, a resident of MHA Harwood Court care home in Newcastle upon Tyne:

We pray for those on the margins of our society and those in our communities living alone without loved ones to support them.

We pray that You will open our eyes to the needs of older men and women within our midst, open our hearts to accommodate them and our minds to understand how what we do affects them.

We pray, especially today for the work of MHA and all it does to enhance the life experience of older people, including people living with dementia.

We pray for the work of MHA Communities as they seek to relieve loneliness and isolation, and particularly for the new work of Digital Communities reducing loneliness and bringing hope to people everywhere.

We pray that all people may learn of Your Love and Grace which are available to all and that reminds us we are never alone.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our Friend.

Amen.

Hymn: (Singing the Faith 410) Lord, Your Church on Earth is Seeking

Blessing

May the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remain with us now and always.

Send us out in the power of your Spirit, to live and work to your praise and glory.

In the name of Christ. Amen

Sermon

“We are on the verge of, if not already living through, an epidemic of loneliness and if we do not start to take action, it will have huge consequences for individuals and for our health and social care systems”. Paul Burstow MP, ‘Summit on tackling loneliness in older Age’, 15 March 2012

The pandemic has meant that many more of us have gained personal insight into what it means to be socially isolated, lonely, or both. Face-to-face interactions and social activities becoming obsolete, working from home became the norm and people had to remain within their post code unable to travel.

Our theme for today is relieving loneliness and bringing hope, and we see this in action in our bible reading today. There’s much we can unpack from the reading: the nature of the exorcism, the location and just what happened with the pigs but at the heart of this story is Jesus extending defiant kindness to a man who had been forced to the margins of his society. It wasn’t a national lockdown that contributed to his loneliness and we can speculate about what was happening to this man; with an awareness of modern psychiatry we might suggest he was suffering from schizophrenia or a personality disorder. The idea of being filled with demonic forces certainly made a lot of sense two thousand years ago. In a way, it almost doesn’t matter what was possessing this man because the significance of the story is in how Jesus approached him and how that approach contrasted with the way the villagers dealt with him.

We read, “*He lived among the tombs; and no one could restrain him anymore, even with a chain; for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one had the strength to subdue him.*” This poor man has been chained up, he has been locked away, he has been shunned. He is isolated, he is alone. He spends all day and all night howling in anguish, beating himself with stones, perhaps copying how the villagers treated him as, of course, stoning would be precisely how that village would respond to this man.

Rejected by a society that couldn’t or wouldn’t engage with him, this desperate man comes to Christ in search of peace. And Christ heals him. He mends what is broken, he eases his torment. He will not allow this man to suffer alone, in isolation any longer. Jesus provides a model for all of us involved in pastoral care. Jesus asks his name and gives him identity. He is clothed and given dignity. Jesus spends time with him and offers support, and Jesus trusts that the community will show him hospitality. Jesus is relieving loneliness and bringing hope, and at the same time challenging the cultural norms. And we too are called to do the same.

MHA, not just in our care homes, but in retirement living and in community schemes, staff, chaplains and volunteers have been working tirelessly with people who have been forced into extreme isolation. Not just 'rule of six', 'keep two meters apart' isolation. In care homes, residents had only PPE wearing staff to see. And when an outbreak occurred you might imagine how it felt to be in the most vulnerable category when the person who lives in the room next you has died from Covid. And when the person who lives in the room opposite you has died from Covid. And when the carer who helps you get changed in the morning is now in Intensive Care on a ventilator, with Covid...It's a lonely, isolated place.

Whilst church doors were closing, MHA chaplains were going into those rooms wearing PPE, holding hands, praying, raising the spirits of residents who were alone. And just as residents were scared, so were the chaplains, so were the carers. But they did it anyway.

We have all been challenged by the loneliness and social isolation that we see around us. Tanya, the MHA Communities manager from our story earlier, churches and services across MHA have responded to where the need is. We've befriended, picked up prescriptions, gone shopping for others and we continue to find ways to relieve loneliness and bring hope.

Earlier we met Anthony, through incredibly hard experience he had lost his confidence. Inspired by her own faith, Tanya was there, with volunteers in her scheme, supported by the church able to give dignity and worth back through providing a new community of friends. It's a story that is replicated across the whole country through churches and MHA Communities.

The pandemic brought the issue of loneliness and isolation into the public domain. We have seen the effect of loneliness and isolation and following Jesus requires us to take action, to be radically inclusive and offer generous hospitality. It may also require a time of reflection as a church where we have knowingly or otherwise been the cause of others isolation.

The work of MHA, both in care homes and those living in the wider community, haven't just continued as they always have and nor has the church. We have learnt to adapt. New ways have been found to bring peace to the fretful, new fresh expressions of faith have been uncovered. MHA chaplains brought technology into their services very quickly. The carers used the same technology to break down those boundaries that kept residents feeling isolated. And MHA's new Digital Communities are relieving loneliness by reaching out to people in their own homes. A 92 year old using Skype for the first time to talk to their family; someone at end of life being prayed with and for through video call; or someone isolating at home but being able to join their closest friends at a virtual coffee morning.

There is hope. Together we can ensure that the work of MHA Communities can thrive so that more people like Anthony can be supported, our chaplains can

continue to be alongside our residents and staff as they continue to heal and today your support will help us reach thousands of others through MHA Digital Communities, meaning that those in our churches and in our communities can be connected.

This pandemic has been horrendous for so many. So many lives lost, families grieving, so much horror and so many tears. Yet out of this horror new ways of worshipping have been found, new ways of breaking down the walls we put up around each other have been discovered. Comfort has been given to those who most needed it, in the darkest moments.

Your actions, however small or large, would have made a huge impact in reducing loneliness over the pandemic. Today, MHA are inviting you to do that even more by asking you to consider donating to support their work in relieving loneliness and bringing hope to even more people. They are asking you to support their MHA Communities work like the one we saw in the video/story, perhaps you could consider volunteering, maybe becoming a befriender? And where there isn't a MHA Communities scheme in your area there is the new MHA Digital Communities, virtually bringing people together, offering wellbeing and spiritual and religious support to people all over the country.

May God continue to guide us, inspire us and be with us as together we seek to relieve loneliness and bring hope to as many people.

Amen.