

A Service for 1st June, 2025 Ascension (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 47 verses 5 to 9

God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted. Amen.

We join our praises to the ascended Christ as we sing a widely-travelled hymn. It was written as a poem by Pastor Karl Boberg in Sweden in the summer of 1885, set to a folk melody, translated into German, then into Russian. A Salvation Army missionary, Stuart Keene Hine, discovered it in Ukraine, translated and adapted it before being forced to return to the UK. He sent a copy to refugees in New Zealand and they forwarded it to Billy Graham. The rest is history! Hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

**1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed: Chorus
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!**

**2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: Chorus**

**3. And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin. Chorus**

**4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration**

And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! Chorus © K. Boberg & Stuart K. Hine

Let us pray.

Lord of all creation, your compassion maintains life within the Universe, your wisdom, might and love are boundless, far beyond the grasp of our understanding. You love us so much that you entered our world as Christ Jesus, sharing our lives and experiences, bringing Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of grace. His life, death and resurrection broke the hold of sin and death, offering us everlasting life by his grace, not by anything we deserve, nor can earn. As if that wasn't enough, you sent the Holy Spirit to live in us to help us answer your call. Lord, we come to offer you all our praise, adoration and thanksgiving in our worship today, so please remove all distractions and anxieties, so we may worship in spirit, love and truth..

Loving Lord, accept our wholehearted thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining world that you made for us, for all the blessings you bestow on us: for people who have guided, inspired and loved us, but most of all thank you for redeeming us at such a tremendous cost. Amen.

Let us set ourselves right with our Lord by confessing our sins.

Hear us, merciful God, as we confess our failure to live as you want us to. We know that we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, by acting and speaking in a way that shames us and grieves you.

Gracious God, help us turn away from sin and back to the path you call us to tread. Merciful Lord, bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness for the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that in your loving-kindness you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow you. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives provide evidence of our faith and are a beacon to draw others to know and love our risen Saviour. Amen.

We shall 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.

Our second hymn was written by Noel and Tricia Richards in 1987. Hymn number 293, 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord'.

**1. All heaven declares
The glory of the risen Lord.
Who can compare
With the beauty of the Lord?
Forever He will be
The Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee
And worship Him alone.**

**2. I will proclaim
The glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain
To reconcile man to God.
Forever You will be
The Lamb upon the throne.
I gladly bow the knee
And worship You alone.**

© Noel & Tricia Richards

The New Testament reading is Revelation chapter 22 verses 12 to 14, 16 and 17 & 20 and 21

"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star."

The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.

Address 1

Revelation is a challenging book which was almost omitted from the canon, the accepted books of the Holy Bible. It is apocalyptic writing, at a time of crisis and was written to encourage readers to see the big picture of human history, beyond the crisis, focussing on end-times when God will reign supreme in peace and justice. The Good News is that evil has been defeated through Calvary and the resurrection. It is often avoided because it is difficult and has startling images and secret symbols which are less familiar to Twenty-First Century readers than Christians living in the last decade of the First Century A.D..

It is a difficult book to understand, but it was meant to be, as John was exiled on Patmos, an island off Turkey. He was known to the Roman authorities, so his message had to be coded. Therefore, Rome was referred to as Babylon, the Roman Empire was the great beast, Jerusalem was Sodom, the Church was represented as the bride, the Lamb and child was Jesus, the woman was Israel, while 7 represented perfection and 6 evil. Thus Emperor Domitian, who was persecuting and killing Christians was 666, evil, evil, evil, or if you prefer, the Devil.

Our reading refers to Jesus, who declares the second coming is imminent, the faithful will be rewarded for their works and all are encouraged to remain faithful and pure until he comes again, for they will enter the New Jerusalem where suffering, sorrow and death are banished and new life inherited.

The last paragraph has the Holy Spirit and the Church calling for Christ to return, but the door is still open to unbelievers to hear the gospel message, 'the water of life', and find salvation. It is an encouragement for us to lead Christ-centred lives and to share Good News with all-comers whenever and wherever we can. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Martin Lekebusch an I.T. specialist, who was born into a Methodist family in 1962. He is distinctly ecumenical and has been a member of Methodist, Anglican, Pentecostal congregations and is an elder at a Baptist church in Gloucester. The hymn was written when Martin was attending a Methodist church in inner-city Birmingham. He describes the congregation at that time as "a very mixed bag with a strongly evangelical character to it, with a charismatic aspect – but also an aspect of social engagement." I have asked that we sing the hymn to "Scarlet Ribbons", which I'm certain you will know, so you can concentrate upon the words. Hymn number 703, 'In an age of twisted values,'

**1. In an age of twisted values
we have lost the truth we need;
in sophisticated language
we have justified our greed;
by our struggle for possessions
we have robbed the poor and weak –
hear our cry and heal our nation:
your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.**

**2. We have built discrimination
on our prejudice and fear;**

hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
if we hold resentments dear.
For communities divided
by the walls of class and race
hear our cry and heal our nation:
show us, Lord, your love and grace.

3. When our families are broken;
when our homes are full of strife;
when our children are bewildered,
when they lose their way in life;
when we fail to give the aged
all the care we know we should –
hear our cry and heal our nations
with your tender fatherhood.

4. We who hear your word so often
choose so rarely to obey;
turn us from our wilful blindness,
give us truth to light our way.
In the power of your Spirit
come to cleanse us, make us new:
hear our cry and heal our nations
till our nations honours you.

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We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far-away. Let us pray.

Loving God, Jesus' passion, death and resurrection remind us that you care for us with boundless, unconditional and redemptive love. Grant us faith, wisdom, compassion and steadfastness to serve you as you desire. Do not let us not close our eyes and hearts to injustice, prejudice or neglect, but instead bid us strive courageously for the wellbeing of everyone and to share your love with our neighbours, nearby and far away.

In a year that we are commemorating the eightieth anniversary of VE Day, help us to recall the terrible cost of war, so we strive for peace and justice. We grieve that wars are currently being waged in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Myanmar, Congo, Somalia and Sudan with all the suffering, destruction, death and displacement that results from mankind's inability to co-exist with neighbours. We pray especially for civilians, particularly children, in Gaza and Ukraine as they face heavy bombardment and deprivation, that peace will end their suffering. Teach the leaders of all nations to negotiate and compromise, rather than using military force when disputes arise. We pray for just and lasting settlements to the conflicts we have named and for your shalom to be bestowed on all nations.

Jesus is the source of healing and well-being, so we pray for people who are ill, for those brought low by loneliness, fear or need and for all who are experiencing the pain of bereavement. In a time of silence, we bring to mind friends and neighbours for whom we are especially concerned..... Loving Lord, help us offer them practical support, but embrace them with your love, so they may be healed, encouraged and granted reassurance.

Saviour God, hear our prayer for this church, churches in our Circuit and indeed the World Church. May the light of Jesus' love guide us through the darkness of this

increasingly secular, materialist world. Unite us in love and purpose and help us proclaim good news boldly to a world that needs good news so much.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care. May the Holy Spirit guide and strengthen us in our discipleship, by following the example of Jesus Christ, by sharing the love you give us with all-comers and trusting in your grace and goodness evermore. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 17 verses 20 to 26

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.

I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” Amen.

Address 2

Our Gospel reading is set at the Last Supper, when Jesus prayed for not only his disciples, but for everybody who would accept the Good News in the future. He was aware of tensions that already existed within the twelve: James and John had vied for prime places in heaven – to the fury of the remainder; whilst the disciples accepted Peter as their leader, he was erratic and too impetuous at times, so Jesus knew that Peter would struggle to keep the disciples united, once he had ascended to his Father. Jesus did not pray that their personalities would be erased, so they might effectively become clones of one another: what he asked was that they would be united in love, just as Christ is united with his Father. Despite their differences, the disciples were commanded to love one another in close fellowship, so the love they received from Jesus would empower them and their unity would convince non-believers of the value and truth of the gospels. Moreover, Jesus’ prayer is universal: he prayed that this unity should be our gift, too.

Such unity depends upon the mutual love of God and Jesus for one another; upon the love of God living within the believers and for believers to let that love shine through their lives, so non-believers may come to know and follow the Lord. Contrary to some people’s views, it does not point to any denomination having all virtues above others. Whilst I am a committed Methodist – and there are many who say I ought to be committed – I recognise that we don’t have all the answers in worship, or service, but having said that, Methodism has a proud tradition of outreach. A fortnight ago, we celebrated Christian Aid, a charity formed at the end of the Second World War by different denominations of churches in Britain and Ireland. The tremendous work done shows how Christians from different traditions make a difference and transform lives. There is great value in the Churches Together Movement, where worshippers from different traditions meet to share ideas and serve their communities, but more can be done: imagine sharing resources, or working collaboratively on projects. We must not allow ourselves to be diverted from our task to love and serve the Lord by detail differences. Let us concentrate upon sharing the Good News Jesus lived and died for.

Just as the first disciples must have thought Jesus prayer fanciful, because human endeavour on its own is doomed to fail, we may think it is impossible for the Church to unite in service to the world. However, the disciples did not anticipate the gift of the Holy Spirit, who came down at Pentecost to convert a group of one hundred and twenty losers into a world-changing, unstoppable dynamic Church that resisted the persecution of the super-power of its age – the Roman Empire – and which has resisted persecution ever since. This same Spirit will give us enough grace to work collaboratively, so we can make a difference to our community – play our part in building the New Jerusalem. Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.

I considered finishing with ‘Where shall my wondering soul begin?’, named as the Wesley’s conversion hymn, but some commentators claim that this was not the case; rather, it was ‘And can it be’, aka ‘The bicycle hymn’ to Tipton Methodist Church! We shall sing hymn number 345, ‘And can it be’.

1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

2. ‘Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
‘Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds enquire no more.

3. He left his Father’s throne above –
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.
‘Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me!

4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

5. No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!

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Benediction.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

