

15th March 2026 – Morning Service

Rev Michael Payne

Call to Worship

We are seen by God in all we do. God seeks us wherever we are.

May we seek to see God in our time together and on into this week.

StF 499 – Great God, your love has called us here

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| 1) Great God, your love has called us here
As we, by love, for love were made;
Your living likeness still we bear,
Though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed;
We come, with all our heart and mind,
Your call to hear, your love to find. | 4) Then take the towel, and break the bread,
And humble us, and call us friends;
Suffer and serve till all are fed,
And show how grandly love intends
To work till all creation sings,
To fill all worlds, to crown all things. |
| 2) We come with self-inflicted pains
Of broken trust and chosen wrong,
Half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
By social forces swept along,
By powers and systems close confined,
Yet seeking hope for humankind. | 5) Great God, in Christ you set us free
Your life to live, your joy to share;
Give us your Spirit's liberty
To turn from guilt and dull despair
And offer all that faith can do,
While love is making all things new. |
| 3) Great God, in Christ you call our name,
And then receive us as your own,
Not through some merit, right or claim,
But by your gracious love alone;
We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat,
And find you kneeling at our feet. | |

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Prayer of Approach, Adoration and Confession

Holy God, you are our loving parent, you love us with the nature of both mother and father. On this Mothering Sunday, we gather around you as your children, to share in your perfect love. We gather to rejoice in your presence and remember your goodness. We see you as Creator God; you knew us before we were born: we bring you our adoration! You know us in each moment of our growing, we bring you our adoration! You know us in each moment of our living, we bring you our adoration! In Christ we become your sons and daughters. Jesus, Lord of life, shepherd, brother, friend, prophet, priest and king, we bring you our adoration! Holy Spirit, comforter and bringer of insight: we bring you our adoration! **Amen.**

A mother sacrifices her own needs for the sake of her children. For the times when we have placed own needs above those of other people, we ask forgiveness and pray: **Lord, have mercy.**

Like a mother, you give of your very self to feed and nourish us. When we have ignored your care and turned away, we ask forgiveness and pray: **Christ, have mercy.**

Can a mother forget her own child? We are sorry for the times when we have forgotten you, Lord. We are sorry for when we have failed to show your love to those around us, we ask forgiveness and pray: **Lord, have mercy. Amen.**

God our gracious parent declares to us, forgiveness and healing, reconciliation and family blessing. **Amen.**

StF 56 – King of glory, King of peace

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| 1) King of Glory, King of Peace,
I will love thee;
And that love may never cease,
I will move thee.
Thou hast granted my request,
Thou hast heard me;
Thou didst note my working breast,
Thou hast spared me. | 3) Seven whole days, not one in seven,
I will praise thee;
In my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.
Small it is, in this poor sort
To enrol thee:
E'en eternity's too short
To extol thee. |
| 2) Wherefore with my utmost art, I will sing thee,
And the cream of all my heart, I will bring thee.
Though my sins against me cried, thou didst clear me, -
And alone, when they replied, thou didst hear me. | |

George Herbert

Reading: Joshua 5: 9-12 (NIV)

Then the Lord said to Joshua, 'Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.' So the place has been called Gilgal to this day.

On the evening of the fourteenth day of the month, while camped at Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites celebrated the Passover. The day after the Passover, that very day, they ate some of the produce of the land: unleavened bread and roasted grain. The manna stopped the day after they ate this food from the land; there was no longer any manna for the Israelites, but that year they ate the produce of Canaan.

Reading: Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32 (NIV)

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them.'

Then Jesus told them this parable:

'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

'Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

'When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants." So he got up and went to his father.

'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.

'The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

‘But the father said to his servants, “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

‘Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

‘The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

StF 350 – I cannot tell

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| 1) I cannot tell why he, whom angels worship,
Should set his love upon us, now or then,
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 Bethlem's manger was his only home,
And that he lived at Nazareth and laboured,
And so the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is come. | 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. |
| 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. | 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 every human heart with love is filled.
But this I know, the skies will thrill with rapture,
And myriad, myriad human voices sing,
And earth to heav'n, and heav'n to earth,
will answer:
'At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is King!' |

William Young Fullerton

Sermon – Our Prodigal Heavenly Father

We refer to the reading from Luke as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. How many know what the word Prodigal means?

The Oxford Dictionary definition of Prodigal is recklessly wasteful, lavish, and extravagant. With this definition in mind, who in this story of Jesus was prodigal the son or the father or both?

Extravagant in Creation

The word seems only to be used today with reference to this parable and so we tend to assume it means something bad. But is it that God is prodigal beyond measure with his abundance laid before us as well as the Son being Prodigal in the wasting of resources?

Our God is one of creative abundance and extravagance. We cannot count the stars; he promised to make his people more abundant than the grains of sand on the shore. We tell children leaves are green when they are multitude of greens as well as other colours. God is prodigal in all his creation, and it is declared “very good”. The scientist is still discovering more compounds and species of plant and animal life on our planet! How abundant is the generosity of God? Variety of sounds and smells; – extravagance, exuberance; our Prodigal God.

What the younger son, described as the prodigal, wasted was what his father had given him for he had nothing of his own until his father gave him his inheritance. The scarcity he suffers was of his own making through wasting his resources. Out of God’s abundance we can create famine, poverty and hunger through the misuse of the resources given to us, rather than the sharing of the abundance.

Extravagant in forgiving

I came across an expression a few years ago – Boomerang kids – they keep coming back – probably a number of you have experienced it. Children finding their way back home and mum is there waiting – though at times even mum may say enough is enough! At times when they come back there is a sense of shame and wanting to leave the past well behind them but swallowing their pride they come back hoping for a good reception. Forgiveness and welcome are given.

The disgrace of the past is left behind. In the reading from Luke’s Gospel, the rebellious son returns to an unconditional welcome. He discovers a ‘promised land’ of all that shared human life is meant to be about: relationships (embrace), status (robe), authority (ring), dignity (sandals), food and fellowship (feast) (vv. 22-23). He has ‘sinned against heaven’ (v. 18) as well as before his father, and heaven’s mercy is lavishly displayed here in earthly joy. The sinning son is welcomed home.

This homecoming echoes that of Israel in Joshua 5 with the provision of the abundance.

Behind this brief text we can find a solemn moment in Israel’s history. At last God’s people are entering the Promised Land. The shame of their past slavery is finally put behind them. In the first part of the chapter, we would have read how through circumcision they had reaffirmed their membership of God’s covenant people. In celebrating Passover, they recall the great deliverance which had so often been forgotten; for the marking of Passover was not a practice they dutifully carried out on their 40-year journey. As they celebrated Passover in this new land one can imagine the truth gradually dawning – that they really had been led and protected all those years by a God of infinite, watchful care. But there were also adjustments to be made to a new way of living. No more manna; here was a whole land, a new Eden, whose fruit they could freely enjoy but whose temptations they needed to avoid.

There lies a parallel picture to the person who comes to a faith in Jesus; God had been preparing them for that moment; a new start in life, a life with new freedoms, but the temptation to misuse the freedom needs resisting. Over and over in the Scriptures we find the image of the God who welcomes back the wanderer, the sinner, the lost.

Extravagant in Love

On Mothering Sunday, this Gospel passage may seem somewhat strange, as it has no mention of a woman, let alone a mother. I remember when in College and University on a Monday morning I would often speak to one of the university students about the service she attended on the previous day. She was a member of the Salvation Army. One particular Monday, she said the previous day the Captain’s wife was preaching and the theme was the prodigal son’s mother, a person who has no mention in the story, an interesting starting point.

In the Western Church God has traditionally been spoken of with male imagery and daring to use female imagery can cause some to face panic attacks and thoughts of heresy. Yet in Isaiah the image of a mother is used in thinking about God's nature of care; Jesus used the image of a mother hen gathering her chicks when looking over the city of Jerusalem to describe his care for Israel. Indeed, in this same section of Luke's gospel, Jesus speaks of the woman who searched for her lost coin and compares that image to the God of love seeking the lost.

Whenever we use human imagery to think about God there are limitations, but when we do we speak of the best human situation possible. The imagery of God as Father only works when we see the human father as being an exemplary human father. If we think of God in terms of a mother, we can think about a mother's love which is at its best sacrificial and self-giving. On a practical and biological note a woman must be sacrificial herself during pregnancy as the baby takes what it needs first and the mother has what is left. The carrying and nurture of the unborn child is literally from the mothers' own resources.

The image of the breastfeeding mother is that of a self-giving act of love, as a mother feeds her baby from her own body, so God feeds us out of the very self of God – Christ gives his body for our spiritual nourishment. We mark this each time we share in our communion service.

In human birth is an act that involves both blood and water – is there an image here that reminds us that our spiritual birth comes through an act of the outpouring of blood and water on the cross?

If we can see God as the mother who seeks not only a coin but also the lost sheep and son, we have a very strong image of a God who suffered real pain and self-giving in order that we might be called children of God. This is love which is overwhelming and overflowing, plentiful, and often, as with children, our response may sometimes be scarce or even non-existent.

The Prodigal Father extravagant in Creation, Forgiveness and love caused problems for the sons; one struggled to believe that such a welcome could be awaiting him and the other thought such a welcome was wholly inappropriate. The challenge is there for us whether we are the younger son wanting to return to our Heavenly Father or the Older Brother who struggles with such an accepting God.

We may need to ask how do we treat the one who wanders from the faith? Do we see them wasting the extravagant generosity of God's love for them?

StF 440 – Amazing grace

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| 1) Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see. | 4) The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures. |
| 2) God's grace has taught my heart to fear,
his grace my fears relived;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed. | 5) And, when this heart and flesh shall fail
and mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess within the veil
a life of joy and peace. |
| 3) Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
God's grace has brought me safe thus far,
and he will lead me home. | 6) When we've been there ten thousand years
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun. |

John Newton

Prayers of Intercession

On this Mothering Sunday we pray for our Mother Church and the congregations that have helped us grow in our faith. We remember in prayer areas of the world where there is conflict and violence and mother's weep for their children. We pray for mothers across this country, and the world, seeking to care for their children whatever their age. We pray for those in our community who have no mother figure around them and find themselves feeling alone. We pray for those who are carers and encouragers, educators and enablers in our communities. We pray that we, as part of Christ's Church, might be people of love and grace, welcome and acceptance. **Amen.**

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 Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and for ever. **Amen.**

StF 255 – The kingdom of God

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| 1) The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow. | 3) The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ
to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss. |
| 2) The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair. | 4) God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all! |

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Blessing

God of all, you long to parent us, and assure us of our place in your family. Send us out from this place filled with the abundance of your love, and ready to take part in the Godly task of parenting in our broken and hurting world. **Amen.**

May the Blessing of a loving parent, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us as we go from here to share the news of love with others. **Amen.**