

15th September 2024 – Morning Service

Martin Rider

Call to Worship - Psalm 9:1 - 2

I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart. I will tell all the miracles you have done. I will be happy because of you; God Most High, I will sing praises to your name. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by a talented Catholic hymn-writer, Bernadette Farrell, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and who has contributed a number of hymns to 'Singing the Faith'.

StF 706 – Longing for light

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| 1) Longing for light, we wait in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see. | 3) Longing for food, many are hungry.
Longing for water, many still thirst.
Make us your bread, broken for others,
Shared until all are fed. |
| Ch) <i>Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ, be our light!
Shine in your Church gathered today.</i> | 4) Longing for shelter, many are homeless.
Longing for warmth, many are cold.
Make us your building, sheltering others,
Walls made of living stone. |
| 2) Longing for peace, our world is troubled.
Longing for hope, many despair.
Your word alone has power to save us.
Make us your living voice. | 5) Many the gifts, many the people,
Many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
Making your kingdom come. |

Bernadette Farrell © 1993 Bernadette Farrell CCL No. 515642

Prayer

Lord of life, in the beginning your Word transformed darkness and chaos into this vast swirling universe of stars, planets and moons. You not only created life but formed eco-systems to sustain your creation. Your wisdom and might are as boundless as your love, but we are still amazed that you reached out to humankind, offering us a relationship with you, so close that we could call you 'Abba', 'Daddy'. Even when we ignored your commandments and set ourselves against to you, your love for us is so great that you did not abandon us, but instead took our mortal flesh and lived among us as Christ Jesus. He came to show us how we should live fulfilled and holy lives by his words and deeds of love, but he also came to bear judgment for the sins of the whole world by becoming the one perfect sacrifice at Calvary. By dying Jesus broke the power of sin and his resurrection offers us everlasting life as a great gift of grace, not something we can grasp by works, nor which we deserve. We rejoice that death no longer has the final word, and so Lord, we come to worship you with joy and awe. May all honour, glory, power and praise be yours, now and evermore. **Amen.**

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession

Almighty God, thank you for all the good things we enjoy; for all you done for us, given and accomplished in us; for people who have guided, loved and inspired us, but most of all for your redemptive grace which we see in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Jesus. Thank you for loving us even at our worst when we are faithless, unloving and unlovable, but help us change our ways.

Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Merciful Lord, forgive us for times when we are self-righteous and judgmental; when we fail to be generous with our possessions and time; when our love for you and our neighbours is lukewarm and when we say and do things that hurt others and grieve you. Warm our hearts, change our ways and restore us to righteousness. Lord in your mercy, **hear our prayer**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have not only pardoned us, but call us to follow you. Lord God, may the Holy Spirit teach us to serve our neighbours cheerfully and faithfully, so we honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. **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.**

Our next hymn was written for the 1968 Harvest Festival of a Methodist church in Tunbridge Wells. Its author was Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a Methodist Minister who not only lived from 1903 to 2000, but wrote most of his hymns after he sat down!

StF 346 – Christ is the world's light

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| 1) Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high. | 3) Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother -
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father.
Glory to God on high. |
| 2) Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high. | 4) Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son, and Father;
Give God the glory, God with us my brother:
Glory to God on high. |

Fred Pratt Green © 1969 Stainer & Bell Ltd CCL No. 515642

Prayers of Intercession

Creator God, we celebrate the wonders and beauty of the world, especially because of the beauty of late summer. However, we are also aware of how broken it is, often by human failure both as stewards of the planet and to love our neighbours as ourselves. We see the suffering that results from greed, spite, pride, foolishness and indifference, so, as Twenty-first Century disciples, we ask you to guide and empower us as we seek to serve other people, both here and further afield. Lord, we recognize our own limitations as we turn to you, for we know all things are possible for you. When the best we can do is not enough, then we pray that you will reach out and inspire people who have greater power and influence to act as well.

Lord of creation, the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend is evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, as highlighted by increasingly strong storms, wildfires and floods which are causing serious damage and loss of life in many countries. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by being less wasteful, by reducing pollution, using only the resources we need and by encouraging others to do the same.

Jesus Christ commanded us to love one another, yet many wars are being waged across the planet – an affront to you and a source of grief to us. We ask you to bless everyone who is working for peace: for negotiators, aid-workers and medics, particularly those who are putting themselves at risk by serving on front lines. May they enjoy success in their endeavours and remain safe in your care. We pray for a just and swift end to fighting in Ukraine and in Gaza, praying that the conflict between Israel and Hamas does not spread further afield. We remember, too, Sudan and Somalia whose conflicts are often unreported by our Media, but may lead to famines if they continue. May peaceful resolutions prevent such a disaster.

King of kings, guide national leaders to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, instead of resorting to force. May they learn to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of the shalom you wish for everybody. Lord, remember in your mercy, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, that they will receive the support they need to rebuild their lives and find healing in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits and, indeed, the World Church. Unite us in love and mission, so we carry the gospel light steadfastly to this strife-ridden, needy world.

We remember people who are lonely, afraid, or in any kind of need or trouble, for all who are sick in body, mind or spirit and everybody who is suffering the agony of bereavement. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned...[*Silence*]

Lord, while we ask you to help us provide them with both practical support and friendship, we pray that you will enfold them in the warmth of your love, comforting, healing, encouraging and strengthening them. Above all, grant them enduring peace.

Abba, heavenly Father bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us share the abundance of your love with everybody we meet, in Jesus' lovely name. **Amen.**

Reading: Mark 8:27 - 38

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

We continue with a hymn written in 1989 by John Bell and the late Graham Maule of the Iona Community. John Bell also composed the melody, "Take this moment'.

StF 513 – Take this moment

- 1) Take this moment, sign, and space;
Take my friends around;
Here among us make the place
Where your love is found.
- 2) Take the time to call my name,
Take the time to mend
Who I am and what I've been,
All I've failed to tend.
- 3) Take the tiredness of my days,
Take my past regret,
Letting your forgiveness touch
All I can't forget.
- 4) Take the little child in me,
Scared of growing old;
Help me here to find my worth
Made in Christ's own mould.
- 5) Take my talents, take my skills,
Take what's yet to be;
Let my life be yours, and yet,
Let it still be me.

John L Bell & Graham Maule © 1989 WGRG Iona Community CCL No. 515642

Sermon

"If any would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Mark 8:34

It is not only cattle and sheep that can suffer from foot and mouth disease. All of us can metaphorically put our foot in our mouth when we speak before we think of the consequences.

A few years ago, I preached at what was then my own church at Amblecote Wordsley. Although the service had gone relatively well, I had preached longer than I'd planned and was preoccupied by the prospect of a fast drive to Bridge Court where I usually delivered Sunday lunches to some of the flats at midday. Thus distracted, I announced the final hymn, 'You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace', thought about one of the congregation, called Joy, and exclaimed, sotto voce I thought, 'Lucky Joy!' Alas, the microphone which worked only intermittently, picked up my words, much to the consternation of the leader of the Sunday School.

'He didn't really say that, did he?' She exclaimed. My daughter, Hannah, replied, 'He most certainly did!' and gave me one of those looks, somewhere between outrage and hysterics. It goes to show that the uncontrolled tongue, as St. James said, is a fire that can ravage a great forest: unlike my faux pas which caused giggling, it can cause hurt and offence, whereas, really, it ought to promote blessings and peace.

Simon Peter discovered this in our gospel reading, for within a short time of earning Jesus' praise for answering the question, 'Who do you say I am?' with, 'You are the Christ', our Lord told him, 'Get behind me, Satan', after Peter rejected Jesus' prediction of his crucifixion and resurrection. Peter's first answer was the result of weighing up the evidence of nearly three years' discipleship: hearing Jesus teach; listening to him confounding the critical Pharisees and Scribes; watching him cure the sick; seeing him perform miracles. Peter had no doubt that the evidence pointed to Jesus as the Messiah, for no other person could have done what he did. Unfortunately, his objection to Jesus' declaration that he would be rejected by the religious Establishment, would be killed, yet would be raised on the third day, was a gut-reaction based on Jewish ideas of the Christ, which certainly did not involve suffering and death.

Although some prophetic writing pointed to the Messiah as a humble figure, the suffering servant, most First Century Jews envisaged God's Anointed more as the bringer of retribution to their enemies from Isaiah 63, his clothes stained with their blood. Their idea was of a Davidic king, who would not only drive out the occupying Romans, but would reunite the Jewish peoples and re-establish them as the major political and economic force they had once been. The creation of a new covenant with God was not seen as a major priority. We can imagine the dismay of the disciples as Jesus foretold his passion, death and resurrection, because his teaching did not fit their expectations of earthly power and glory, so the impetuous Peter spoke up and declared, "This won't happen if I can help it".

Jesus' response, "*Get behind me, Satan!*" seems harsh at first, but the Greek word translated as 'Satan', Satana, also means 'adversary', or 'opponent', so Christ was effectively telling Peter not to oppose God's plan for our salvation, not calling him the devil! His next comments corroborated this: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of humans". It is clear that Jesus was not willing to abandon his Father's will for what human beings cherish: power; wealth and fame.

As a result, Christ made it clear to all his followers – including us – that discipleship is unlikely to earn us a fortune, nor popularity, nor authority over others. Indeed, Jesus is the Servant King, who washed his disciples' feet like a lowly servant, who submitted to suffering without cursing his oppressors and prayed for the forgiveness of the very people who crucified him. He tells us that, if we choose to follow him, we should do so in response to his grace, not in hope of gaining any kind of advantage in worldly terms. Indeed, when Jesus said, "*If any would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*", he meant that we should be prepared to face what he had faced, suffering, shame, rejection – even death in some parts of the world, rather than earthly glory.

Don't forget, the cross is not only a ghastly instrument of torture, usually reserved for the basest criminals, but anybody who was crucified died under a Deuteronomic curse! Carrying your cross means more than being inconvenienced by health, or in Carol's case, a trying husband! It means offering all, showing the total commitment of The Methodist's Covenant Prayer: '*I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace. Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded; when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking; when I have all things, and when I have nothing. I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose. Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. May it be so for ever. Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.*' Discipleship is not something we should do lightly, for it requires real commitment.

Jesus' words mean we are being called to offer all that we have and all that we are in service to the Lord. We trust in his great goodness and redeeming love, rather than in the values of the world. Jesus poured out all he had for love of sinners like us.

My friends, will you brave the spite and hostility of our increasingly secular and selfish society which frequently rejects kingdom values? Will we speak up for justice for the poor and oppressed of the developing world, for the refugees seeking new lives in Europe, as well as for people we know who are burdened by debt, or are marginalised because of race, faith, gender or disabilities?

Are we willing to accept personal accountability for our actions as well as demanding it of the rich and powerful when they fail to live up to our expectations? Are we able and willing to accept that might is not always right, for even our Lord's helplessness at Calvary was strong enough to destroy Satan's power? Love will overcome hatred, so let us take up our cross and play our part in God's mission of love to our world. Amen.

Our concluding hymn was written by Jacqueline Jones that challenges us. Jacqui is a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the UK for 5 years and now lives in Christchurch, NZ as a vicar's wife!

StF 662 – Have you heard God’s voice

- 1) Have you heard God's voice;
Has your heart been stirred?
Are you still prepared to follow?
Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
Though the way be rough and narrow?
- Ch) *Will you walk the path that will cost you much
And embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
The disciples of tomorrow?*
- 2) Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
When the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground
When the crowds are turning violent?
- 3) In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?
Will you stop and eat, and when
friendships start,
Will you share your faith with the faithless?
- 4) Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
And believe it could be different?
Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?
- E) *We will walk the path that will cost us much
And embrace the pain and sorrow.
We will trust in One who entrusts to us
The disciples of tomorrow.*

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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 now and for evermore. Amen.