

18th May 2025 – Morning Service

Martyn Filsak

Call to Worship

We remind ourselves that Easter is not a day; it is a season. On this fifth Sunday in Easter we are reminded that Jesus calls us into one new united humanity of Jew and Gentile, and of his command to love one another. Let us therefore join together in worshipping our glorious God with Alleluias.

StF 75 – From all that dwell below the skies

1) From all that dwell below the skies

Let the Creator's praise arise:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Let the Redeemer's name be sung,

Through every land, by every tongue:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

2) Eternal are thy mercies, Lord;

Eternal truth attends thy word:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Thy praise shall sound from shore to shore,

Till suns shall rise and set no more:

Alleluia! Alleluia!

Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!

Isaac Watts

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Mighty Creator God, we stand in awe of your power and wisdom that we see showcased in the Universe around. We rejoice in the vastness and attention to detail that show your power and creativity. We exult in the Saviour, Jesus, through faith in whom we have assurance of eternal life. We praise you for the Holy Spirit who dwells within us and gives comfort and courage. We rejoice that you have called us into a new humanity, Jew and Gentile, people of all nations and backgrounds who trust in you and are united.

O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God. How unsearchable are your judgements, and your paths beyond searching out. Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been your counsellor? Who has ever given to you anything, so that you should pay it back? For from you and through you and to you are all things. Glory to God for ever!¹

Gracious and all-wise God, we come before you as imperfect people. We understand your purposes only in part, and yet sometimes think we know better than the way to which your Word has pointed. We rely on worldly wisdom rather than yours. We leave undone things that we should have done, and fail to complete the task that you have assigned to us. We confess our sins and ask for a new assurance of forgiveness.

Thanks be to God! We are forgiven for all past, present and future sins. We are assured that we belong to the Lord for ever. **Amen**

StF 451 – Open the eyes of my heart Lord

Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,

Open the eyes of my heart.

I want to see you

I want to see you.

To see You high and lifted up,

Shining in the light of Your glory.

Pour out Your power and love,

As we sing holy, holy, holy,

Holy, holy, holy,

Holy, holy, holy,

Holy, holy, holy,

I want to see You.

Paul Baloche © 1997 Integrity Music

Reading: John 13:31-35

When he was gone, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. 'My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come. 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.'

StF 242 – A new commandment

A new commandment I give unto you:
That you love one another as I have loved you,
That you love one another as I have loved you.

By this the world shall know you are my disciples
If you have love for one another.
By this the world shall know you are my disciples
If you have love for one another.

Anonymous

Reading: Acts 11:1-18

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.'

Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." 'I replied, "Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth." 'The voice spoke from heaven a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

'Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, "Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved." 'As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: "John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit." So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?' When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life.'

Sermon

In the gospel passage, Jesus continues a lengthy discourse to his disciples in advance of his crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. In the course of this, he gives a new commandment, that the disciples love one another. Is this really so new though? Love is an important principle but actually so fundamental to Jesus and his teaching that we might struggle to believe that the idea of loving one another is really so new.

As is so often the case, it is when we look closely into it that we see the full depth. There is nothing new about the concept of love. The Hebrews under Moses were commanded to love the Lord their God with all of their heart, mind and strength, and to love their neighbour as themselves. The new thing that Jesus introduces is that we love one another as he has loved us. Now that really is radical! When we think of the extent of love that Jesus has shown to us, it indicates to us how great is the challenge. It even seems impossible, and is indeed so, unless we have God's help to do it.

In order to love others in the way that Jesus challenges us, we have to understand what he has done for us. The reading from Acts puts this into focus. The gospels tell us of the depth of Jesus' love for us, which is seen in the lengths that he went to in order to save us. Acts shows us the results of Jesus' sacrifice, namely that we become his own people, called to be part of a new humanity through faith in him, a new community that transcends traditional barriers.

The ministry of Jesus was carried out almost entirely within the geographical boundaries of Israel and Judea, and almost entirely to Jews. There are healings that involve Gentiles, but these are rare in the narrative.

Jesus himself said that he was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, though he knew that Gentiles would eventually be brought in. At the start of the book of Acts, the apostles preached only to Jews. However, the gospel was destined for a much wider audience! It was always God's intention that the nations of the world would be included in the gospel invitation. Acts chapters 10 and 11 describe how this shift took place. It necessitated a complete change in understanding by the church leaders of the time. Our reading started in chapter 11, where the church leaders have heard that non-Jews have received the Holy Spirit, and want Peter to explain. Surely the gospel was only for Jews, but now it appears to the church leaders that Peter has gone into the home of Gentiles and eaten with them, which went against Jewish custom.

Peter explains by summarising the events described in more detail in the narrative of chapter 10. Peter had seen a vision and heard a voice explaining its meaning, which prepared him for what was to happen next. Three men who were messengers of a Roman Centurion called Cornelius, had come to Joppa in search of Peter, to invite him to come and speak in the house of Cornelius. The Spirit told Peter to have no hesitation in going with them. Peter and six Christian brothers travelled the thirty or so miles from Joppa to Caesarea where Cornelius lived, and met Cornelius, who told them that an angel had appeared to him, prompting him to send messengers to Joppa to fetch Peter, who would come with a message of salvation for him and his household.

Notice the ways in which the Lord communicates. Peter had a vision and heard a voice, then received affirmation from the Holy Spirit on the arrival of the messengers that he should go with them. Cornelius received an angelic messenger. See that God communicates in a number of different ways. I can't claim to have seen visions, heard a voice or received instructions by an angel, though I know people who have. However, I do believe that I have been prompted by the Holy Spirit on a number of occasions.

We go back now to Peter, describing events in the house of Cornelius. Peter, as related in chapter 10, preaches a straightforward gospel message, and before Peter even gets a chance to finish his sermon, the Holy Spirit comes down onto Cornelius and his household, and they are heard speaking in tongues and praising God, just as the Jewish believers had experienced on the day of Pentecost.

According to Jewish thought up to that point, this wasn't supposed to happen! These people were not Jewish, and yet they had received the same blessings as Jews received. This challenged all the conventions. However, God had acted, and had spoken, and the Jewish church leaders rejoiced that Gentiles were included. They would come to understand that the Hebrew scriptures had been saying all along that this would happen. Good things would come out of Israel and bless the whole world. Perhaps today, for most of the people who are reading this sermon or listening to it, this is hardly a new message. Most of us are Gentiles and we are used to the concept of the gospel being for all. Perhaps the problem for us is the opposite one. We forget where we came from! The Jewish people can be seen as a curiosity, or perhaps as the ones that missed the mark somehow and are replaced by the Christians. However, this is not what the Bible teaches. The truth is that God called the Jewish people, Israel, to be his own, and wanted them to believe in Messiah Jesus. God has also "grafted in" the Gentiles who believe in Jesus, and made them part of his people, along with believing Jews. The plan is that we are joined together as one united people believing in Jesus. The Biblical teaching is that the Gentile Church does not replace Israel, it joins Israel. Gentile believers in Jesus join Jewish believers in Jesus.

This may sound complicated, but let's look at the practical outworking for us (majority Gentile) people here in the Vale of Stour. First, let us pray for Jewish people to recognise and believe in Jesus, their Messiah. Second, let us give due respect to our spiritual origins. God, through the Jewish people, has given us the Scriptures and the Messiah Jesus. Most, if not all, of the New Testament was written by the early believers in Jesus, who were all Jewish, as was Jesus himself. Jesus reminds us in John chapter 4 that "salvation comes from the Jews". There is no room for a superior attitude on our part. Even our western society is built on Jewish-Christian principles from our Jewish Bibles.

Thirdly, let us rejoice in the sheer wonder of the wisdom of God (see footnote in the prayer of adoration)! It was God's plan that we are grafted into his people through faith in Jesus, and we share in the covenant promises given to the Jews.

It is only as we realise how amazing is God's grace to us, that we are able to love one another in the same way that Jesus has loved us. We realise how great is the love of Jesus for us, that he was willing to be crucified to reconcile us to God and include us in the people of God. The gospel destroys barriers that keep us apart, as Jews and Gentiles of all nations are made one people through faith in Jesus. The love of God expressed in us leaps over all kinds of divisions. If we love one another, the world will see that the gospel is real and exciting, and Jews and Gentiles will be drawn to the Saviour.

StF 547 – Beyond these walls of worship

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1) Beyond these walls of worship
In the stress and joy of life,
Can we offer you our bodies
As a living sacrifice?
Will we keep you at the centre
Far beyond the Sunday call?
Will we turn to you, be transformed by you;
Still declare you God of all? | 3) Beyond these walls of worship
May your Spirit strengthen us
To make the whole of life our worship
As we witness to your love.
From this hour in your presence
Send us out now to proclaim
That we'll live our life as a sacrifice
To the glory of your name. |
| 2) Beyond these walls of worship,
In the times of work and rest,
Will we display your love for all
When our faith's put to the test?
When the people that surround us
Deny that you are there,
Will we display our faith in you -
In life, in praise, in prayer? | |

Ian Worsfold & Paul Wood © Ian Worsfold & Paul Wood

Prayers of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Lord, we give you thanks that faith in Jesus has brought into being a great community of believers from all over the world, both Jew and Gentile. We praise you because we are part of that great gathering and that you have promised us your presence for ever. **Amen.**

We pray for the great throng of believers throughout the world. May they be united in you, no matter what their denominational labels are. We pray especially for Christians who are given a hard time because of their faith. Strengthen them and enable them to preach the gospel of Christ, along with us.

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

We pray for nations in conflict, particularly in the Ukraine and the Middle East. We look forward to the coming reign of Christ when all wars will be ended. Until that happens we look to you to bless all those who not only desire peace but work towards it. May they act in love and truth to bring reconciliation.

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

We pray for our own nation, for our Government and Parliament, that those who make decisions on our behalf and those who represent us would act in wisdom and knowledge, with love and courage, to promote the freedom and prosperity of all citizens. We pray for local Councillors, especially those who were elected for the first time in this month's elections, that they may work selflessly and courageously for their communities. We pray for private businesses and the third sector, plus all individuals in our nation, that we may all live and work together in peace in order that all may flourish.

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

We pray for our local churches of all denominations, and for our circuit. In time of change and transition may we look to you for guidance and stability. We pray for those of our congregations and outside of them who need your special touch on their lives right now because of the difficulties that they are facing, and we trust you for your supply.

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

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.

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 545 – Be thou my vision

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light. | 4) Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise:
Be thou mine inheritance now and always, -
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart:
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art. |
| 2) Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
Be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord;
Be thou my great Father, thy child let me be;
Be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee. | 5) High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright Sun,
O grant me its joys after vict'ry is won;
Great Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all. |
| 3) Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power. | |

Irish 8th Century translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne, versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hall

Blessing

We praise you, Lord, because you have fed us with your Word, strengthened us and united us in Christ. Let our lives be a blessing to those around us as we share the light of Divine Love and the message of reconciliation through Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us evermore. **Amen**

¹ *Prayer based on Romans 11:33-36*