

19th September 2021 – Morning Service

If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all

Martin Rider

Call to Worship - Psalm 8

Our Lord and Ruler. Your name is wonderful everywhere on earth! You let your glory be seen in the heavens above. With praises from children and from tiny infants, you have built a fortress. It makes your enemies silent, and all who turn against you are left speechless. I often think of the heavens your hands have made, and of the moon and stars you put in place. Then I ask, “Why do you care about us humans? Why are you concerned for us weaklings?” You made us a little lower than you yourself, and you have crowned us with glory and honour. You let us rule everything your hands have made and you put all of it under our power – the sheep and the cattle and every wild animal, the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea and all ocean creatures. Our Lord and Ruler. Your name is wonderful everywhere on earth! Amen.

As we gather in God’s presence, let us sing a hymn I wrote after visiting Revd. Peter Knight shortly before he passed into new life. [*Tune: Lucerna Laudoniae STF 102i*]

Song – Christ is here within this place

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| 1) Christ is here, within this place!
Bringing his redemptive grace.
Stop: be still and hear his voice,
Bid him welcome and rejoice. | 3) Christ is here! He lives again,
Shares our joys, our woes, our pain.
Christ is here; trust and obey,
Serve him now without delay. |
| Ch) <i>Light of the world, Redeemer King,
All our praise to you we bring.</i> | 4) Christ is here and he must reign
In our hearts, or all’s in vain.
Christ is here! Come one, come all,
Hear his Word and heed his call. |
| 2) Christ is here to tend each soul,
Seek us sinners, make us whole.
Christ came here to set us free
On a cross at Calvary. | |

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Prayer

Almighty God, the beauty of the earth and skies, particularly in Autumn, are clear evidence of your creative, limitless power which formed the universe and all that lives within it. Faithful, compassionate God, the harvest of ripened crops proclaims your boundless love that sustains us. God our Saviour, the cross reminds us of the redemptive grace of Christ Jesus, your Son, who lived amongst us, was crucified and rose from the tomb to break the power of sin and death and to restore our relationship with you. We pray that you will accept and bless our worship today. Take away anxiety and distractions, so we can offer the best we have in our adoration and praise to you, in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Everlasting Lord, we have come to thank you for all you have been, are, and shall be in the future. Thank you for your gift of life, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world in which we live, for the many blessings we have received from you and which you continue to bestow upon us, but above all else, thank you for loving us even when we stray from you, when we are loveless and unlovable, for you seek us out and restore us.
L: Merciful Lord **R: Forgive us**

Heavenly Father, forgive us if we are too absorbed, or too busy to hear your call, or respond to your voice. Help us to be guided by you, Lord, for we know that whereas your love for us is boundless and unfailing, we don't always share your love with our neighbours and can be judgmental of the way other people look or behave. Lord, in sorrow we confess that we are selfish, self-centred and hard-hearted at times, so we come to ask for both forgiveness and the grace to change our ways for the better.

L: Merciful Lord **R: Forgive us**

Lord, there are times when we fail to see the gifts and graces of those around us, when we criticize, undermine, or let down other people, whereas you see the potential of everybody. Teach us to see people around us through Christ Jesus' eyes, so we can love and serve them as he does.

L: Merciful Lord **R: Forgive us**

Gracious Lord, you help us grow and develop in faith and works. You offer the promise of forgiveness and new life. Help us to both accept your love and to work with you to build up your Kingdom, in response to your steadfast mercy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. **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 by Richard Gillard, who was born in Wiltshire in England but emigrated to New Zealand with his family when he was three years old. He had no formal musical training. He wrote the third verse first, in early 1976, but didn't complete both hymn and melody until late 1977. I think it was worth the wait.

StF 611 – Brother, sister let me serve you

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| 1) Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you:
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too. | 4) I will weep when you are weeping,
When you laugh I'll laugh with you;
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through. |
| 2) We are pilgrims on a journey,
And companions on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load. | 5) When we sing to God in heaven
We shall find such harmony,
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony. |
| 3) I will hold the Christ light for you
In the night-time of your fear;
I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear. | 6) Brother, sister let me serve you
Let me be as Christ to you;
Pray that I may have the grace
To let you be my servant, too. |

Prayers of Intercession

Heavenly Father, although you have blessed us with this beautiful, self-sustaining planet which should meet the needs of all, daily news reports, remind us of its brokenness, most of which is the result of human failure, greed, cruelty, pride, selfishness and indifference. Lord, grant us all we need to comfort and support neighbours who are troubled or needy – acting as Jesus would. However, in situations where our best will not be enough, we pray that you will reach out to people who can bring about healing and wholeness, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, guide and inspire world leaders to use their power justly and compassionately, seeking peaceful resolutions to disputes, rather than turning to military action. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and intolerance across the world, especially in Afghanistan where allied troops have left and the population faces Taliban rule once more. The situation is so grave that it is difficult to know what to pray for, other than that those who have been evacuated may find safe refuge and compassionate treatment from their hosts. May those trapped within Afghanistan be protected from the worst excesses the world witnessed twenty years ago. Loving God, breathe your Spirit of peace upon mankind; comfort and support all who are suffering the effects of man's inhumanity to man and help us remember that we are all made one in Christ.

We pray, too, for refugees who are so desperate they are willing to put their lives in danger by trying to cross the Channel in barely sea-worthy craft. Again, Lord, we know we don't have answers to the situation, but we pray that you will guide our leaders to adopt a humane approach to these asylum-seekers. Lord of life, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

Lord of healing and hope, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Grant them healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued even in the midst of their brokenness. Remember in your mercy our neighbours who are suffering the effects of this pandemic: people who are lonely, afraid, unemployed; those who feel undervalued and unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, particularly during this pandemic. In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care..... [Silence] Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, where they may find healing, courage, comfort, hope and peace.

Sovereign God, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide, especially as we begin to emerge from the shadow of COVID19: make us all one, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world. Grant that every member of the Church may truly and humbly serve you and that the life of Christ may be revealed in all we do and say. We ask your blessing upon people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they be successful and safe in their endeavours, dear Lord.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers and thereby glorifying your name, through our Saviour's Name. **Amen.**

Graham Kendrick wrote our next hymn for the Spring Harvest of 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant.

StF 272 – From heaven you came

- 1) From heaven You came, helpless babe,
Entered our world, Your glory veiled;
Not to be served but to serve,
And give Your life that we might live.
- 2) There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load He chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but Yours', He said.
- 3) Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.
- 4) So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him,
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving.

Graham Kendrick © 1983 Thankyou Music CCL No. 515642

Reading: Mark 9:30 - 37

They left that place and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know where they were, because he was teaching his disciples. He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise." But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it. They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?" But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest. Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all." He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."

Sermon

Who in his or her right mind would want to lead a political party, let alone become Prime Minister? Leaving aside the question of sanity, it appears that many, if not most, MPs harbour ambitions to become leaders. From the time Theresa May became leader of the Conservative Party several MPs were determined to remove her from power, ostensibly because they didn't like the Chequers terms for leaving the European Union, but more likely for less-principled reasons. In the same way Jeremy Corbyn had a number of Shadow Ministers who refused to serve under him. I wonder whether or not the prestige of leadership is worth the soul-destroying intrigues that follow their election. Certainly, Westminster is a place where ambitious MPs plot against their leaders and cause strife within their parties as a result, but I don't know how comforting it is that Christ's disciples were also guilty of power-seeking.

Last week's lectionary reading told how Simon Peter rebuked Jesus for criticising his forewarning of the disciples about his rejection, death and resurrection. Jesus told him, "*Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*" The gospel passage shows us that it wasn't only Simon Peter whose mind was set upon human, rather than kingdom values, for as they walked through Galilee to Capernaum, a quarrel broke out amongst the disciples over who was to be the greatest among them. You may wonder why the Lord didn't stop and upbraid them then and there, but the path they would have walked was almost certainly too narrow for more than two to walk abreast and, out of respect for their Master, the disciples would have straggled behind. Moreover, Jesus probably wanted to avoid a public rebuke, so he waited until they arrived at the house where they were to stay.

When he asked, "*What were you arguing about on the road?*" Jesus already knew, but he clearly wanted to see whether or not they recognised that they had been wrong to indulge in such a quarrel.

Their silence shows they recognised their fault, so the Lord didn't rebuke them, but simply declared, "*If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.*" In other words, Kingdom Wisdom turns human values on their head: the greatest followers are those who are humble and willing to serve others, irrespective of their status. This is not the way our secular society looks at greatness, for the wealthy and powerful, usually employ people to perform tasks they consider demeaning for them. I remember how uncomfortable I felt when, as an ATC officer, I attended an RAF Camp, where for a week I had my own batman, who would have been as old as my father. I could not get used to the idea of having the batman pressing my uniform, cleaning my shoes and waking me in the morning with a cup of tea – so I made sure both uniform and shoes were immaculate before I retired at night - yet he didn't seem to resent his duties, but conducted himself with great dignity.

Our Society is certainly at odds with Jesus' teaching, with leading figures, in the Media, politics and commerce seeking wealth and status way beyond what they deserve, whilst nurses, teaching assistants, carers and cleaners, without whom our lives would be the poorer, are usually poorly-paid and are not regarded as 'important' generally. As an ex-teacher, I know how valuable teaching assistants can be when there are several children with special needs who need to be supported individually. As Chaplain at Bridge Court MHA, I know how vital a part carers and cleaners play there – and also how valuable are those who care for relatives and friends in the community – it is estimated these carers save the Government at least £20 million per annum, yet consider how little they receive for their efforts. Until the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic, serving others seemed to be going out of fashion, especially in the voluntary field. The increase in bureaucracy and DBS checks probably exacerbated the decline in volunteers, but many organisations, such as Scouting, Guides, Boys' and Girls' Brigades, Age Concern and Youth Clubs were experiencing real difficulties in meeting the needs of both young and elderly before February 2019.

You may ask why service was so strongly advocated by Jesus. If so, consider Christ himself: his ministry is a perfect example of humility and service. In the words of Charles Wesley in 'And can it be...' tells us why we should follow him: '*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.*' God's own Son humbled himself by taking on our humanity, divesting himself of all his divine attributes except for love, so he could show the true nature of his Father – boundless grace to all-comers. He healed people who were outcasts because of disease, disability and mental disorders; he embraced those who 'decent' society despised: beggars; tax gatherers, prostitutes, besides others deemed 'sinners'; he reached out to Gentiles, even to occupying Romans and Samaritans who Jews hated with a passion. No one was outside the boundaries of his grace – unmerited, freely-given love. More than all this, Christ Jesus was even willing to die a brutal, cursed death in order that by becoming the one-perfect sacrifice for all sin, he could restore us to a new relationship with God the Father – a covenant of love and renewal. He could have walked away from the agony and humiliation of the cross, but he drank the cup of suffering because of his love for all people, sinners though we are.

Jesus took a child in his arms and told his followers, "*Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.*" The word 'welcome' is a poor translation of the Greek, **Dechomai**, which means to receive kindly, or serve and as at that time, children had no status, our Lord was telling his followers they must serve those considered least significant, not only in Hebrew society, but in the Gentile world, too.

Don't forget that service does not only mean physical effort: praying for others; listening to the troubled and lonely; comforting the bereaved and distressed; providing refreshments at the end of the service; distributing and collecting hymnals – all these answer Jesus' call. No form of service is too humble for the Lord to acknowledge and receive. We are challenged to reach out to serve all-comers in whatever way we can, not in hope of reward, nor of gaining power, or importance, but to answer Christ's call to be his earthly hands, for if we don't play our part in building up God's kingdom here on earth – even if all we can offer is small indeed – how can we expect things to improve? As the writer of Proverbs said, loving and serving God is the greatest sign of wisdom. May we all be truly wise! Amen.

We close our service with a hymn written by the prolific Methodist minister, Revd. Fred Pratt Green

StF 415 – The church of Christ

- 1) The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.
- 2) Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.
- 3) Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.
- 4) For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.
- 5) We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word

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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.**