

21st May 2023 – Morning Service

Aldersgate
Martin Rider

Call to Worship – Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared. I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning. O Israel, put your hope in the LORD, for with the LORD is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to be our guide. It was written by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations.

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!</i>
<i>Shine in our hearts.</i>
<i>Shine through the darkness.</i>
<i>Christ, be our light!</i>
<i>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 of Praise

Almighty God, you are the source and sustainer of all living beings throughout the universe, so we have come to worship you with awe and wonder as we celebrate your boundless, inexhaustible love for sinners like us. At a time when we had made ourselves your enemies, Jesus came into the world to share our lives and to bring Good News in both words and deeds. He also came as the Paschal Lamb to atone for the sins of the world at Calvary. By means of his resurrection, Jesus offers us eternal life through his grace alone, by faith in him, not by anything we can do, nor anything deserve. After he ascended to heaven, you sent the Holy Spirit to live within us as our inspiration, guide, comforter and friend. Amazing, gracious God, may your holy Name be praised for evermore. **Amen.**

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Confession

Loving Lord, thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which we live, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities that enrich our lives as we serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for continuing to love us even when we know we are often faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess that we don't live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly. We certainly do not always love our neighbours as we love ourselves and, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience, we know how deeply we grieve you and add to the world's brokenness. There are times when we despair about our sinful state as deeply as John Wesley felt at Aldersgate Street in 1738. Forgive us, Lord and help us change our ways.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer.**

Loving Lord, warm and mould our hearts and guide us to lead Christ-centred lives, rather than self-centred ones. Help us obey your call to serve our neighbours with compassion and generosity of spirit.

L: Lord, in your mercy **R: Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus, without the burden of guilt to hinder us. May the Holy Spirit enable us to love and serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of our Risen Lord 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 by Oklahoma-born Carol Owens, who, with husband Jimmy, have written many hymns and gospel songs. This one was popular at once when it was published in 1972.

StF 424 – God forgave my sin

1) God forgave my sin in Jesus' name,
I've been born again in Jesus' name;
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share His love as He told me to.

2) All power is given in Jesus' name,
In earth and heaven in Jesus' name;
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share His power as He told me to.

*Ch) He said: 'Freely, freely, you have received,
Freely, freely, give;
Go in My name and because you believe,
Others will know that I live.'*

Carol Owens © 1972 Bud John Songs CCL No. 515642

Prayer of Intercession

Heavenly Father, we offer our thanksgiving and praise for this wonderful, fruitful and self-sustaining world and how you have blessed our lives in so many ways. Help us to share your grace by serving our neighbours as your earthly hands, by doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can for as long as we can. However, sometimes the situations we face are far beyond our powers, but nothing is beyond your wisdom and might. Therefore, when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess such wisdom and power, so they may heal some of the brokenness in the world.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are troubled and needy. We pray for aid to reach the victims of natural disasters promptly, especially those affected by recent flooding in Congo and Malawi, but including people still inundated in the Sind Valley six months after major floods, populations affected by tornadoes in Mississippi and Central USA, and particularly everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. May aid be offered by governments around the world, not only to these lands, but to countries afflicted by droughts and famine. May grain and oil from Ukrainian ports continue to be sent to relieve their plight and we ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide such victims with desperately-needed aid.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia, their families, friends and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns for them to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them...[Silence]

Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer to our prayer, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Lord, we know so many countries caught up conflict, and so we pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and Jerusalem, asking that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and all peoples. May peace and justice be established and prevail. We pray for the leaders of the world's nations. May they govern justly and with mercy for without justice and compassion there is no real peace. In your loving-kindness remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. Lord, help them find justice and healing, so they can rebuild their lives in hope and security.

Lord, you provide us with a feast of love, so we may share its abundance with our neighbours. Therefore, we pray for this church, churches in our Circuit, neighbouring circuits and, indeed the whole Church of Christ, that we learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. Heavenly Father, help us work together in outreach and help us bear the gospel light to a world darkened by materialism, sin and want. Grant us the faith and steadfastness we need to answer our call to serve the risen Lord.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, help us lead Christ-centred lives as we share your abundant love with friends and strangers alike, so we glorify the name of our risen Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

Reading: Romans 5:1 - 11

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Amen.

Reading: Luke 10:1 – 12, 17 - 20

After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road.

When you enter a house, first say, 'Peace to this house.' If people of peace are there, your peace will rest on them; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house. When you enter a town and are welcomed, eat what is set before you. Heal the sick who are there and tell them, 'The kingdom of God is near you.' But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God is near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town.

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, "Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name." He replied, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." Amen.

We shall sing a hymn, long-known as 'The Wesley's Conversion hymn', as Charles Wesley wrote in his diary that he began it on 23rd May, 1738 and completed it a day later, when older brother, John felt his heart 'strangely warmed'. Interestingly, Charles had felt saved on 21st May, much to John's dismay, for John was feeling particularly depressed and low.

StF 454 – Where shall my wondering soul begin?

- 1) Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave redeemed from death and sin,
A brand plucked from eternal fire,
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
Or sing my great deliverer's praise?
- 2) O how shall I the goodness tell,
Father, which thou to me hast showed?
That I, a child of wrath and hell,
I should be called a child of God,
Should know, should feel my sins forgiven,
Blest with this antepast of heaven!
- 3) And shall I slight my Father's love?
Or basely fear his gifts to own?
Unmindful of his favours prove?
Shall I, the hallowed cross to shun,
Refuse his righteousness to impart
By hiding it within my heart?
- 4) Outcasts, to you, yes, you, I call,
Christ's love invites you to believe
He spreads his arms to embrace you all;
Sinners alone his grace receive:
No need of him the righteous have;
He came the lost to seek and save.
- 5) Come, O my guilty kindred, come,
Groaning beneath your load of sin!
His bleeding heart shall make you room,
His open side shall take you in;
He calls you now, invites you home:
Come, O my guilty kindred, come!

Charles Wesley

A Prayer for John & Charles Wesley

Source of goodness, truth and love we acknowledge your saving grace that warmed the hearts of John and Charles Wesley, changing the direction of their ministries to preaching and practising a gospel of social holiness. We offer our thanks for the Spirit that inflamed their souls and those involved in early Methodism, facing scorn, rejection and danger as they ventured into communities abandoned by polite society, offering support and salvation through practical help, prayer and hymns. Gracious God, warm our hearts, ignite our souls with desire to seek neighbours whose lifestyles are far from what you would have them be and to bring them to know you through our words and deeds of love, through Jesus Christ our risen Lord. **Amen**

Sermon

Let me begin with a warning: I'm going to be controversial because today I shall call the Holy Spirit 'She' not 'He'. I'm not being different, but am making a point to make us think about traditions. Let me explain. The Hebrew word for the Holy Spirit is Ruach and it is feminine. The Greek is Pneuma, which is neutral, but I won't call the Spirit 'It'. It may be traditional to use 'He', but I'm going to break that tradition if only to remind us that God has both male and female characteristics. The Holy Spirit does not just belong to ancient history: she is evident in our world, too, if only we are perceptive enough to recognise her.

Luke recorded how, almost 2000 years ago, a hundred and twenty followers of Jesus had assembled at a house in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. They were in a bolted room because Jesus had ascended into heaven and they were afraid. They certainly felt a deep sense of hopelessness and failure. The disciples had been slow to understand Jesus' teachings, had deserted Christ in his hour of need, while Peter, who had boasted that he would remain loyal to the death had denied knowing Jesus three times. They had rejected the women's news that Jesus had been raised from the dead, only accepting the resurrection when the Lord appeared directly to them. Although Jesus' appearances had filled the hundred and twenty with joy, following his ascension they were not only afraid of the Jewish Establishment, but clearly felt inadequate to Jesus' commission, '*Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation*'. How could such, weak, ignorant vessels do what Jesus commanded?

John's gospel provided the answer, for, at the Last Supper Jesus promised his disciples, '*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth*'. Jesus added, '*the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you*'. The Spirit entered them, their hearts were warmed so much that they seemed drunk with joy and those simple Galileans received the gift of communicating with Jews from throughout the known world – truly a reversal of Babel! To the amazement of all who saw them, the apostles were as bold then as they had been afraid less than an hour before and Peter preached his first sermon – after which three thousand men, not counting women and children were baptised into Christ Jesus. Now let us consider events 1700 years later.

On 24th May, 1738 John Benjamin Wesley sat alone at a house in Temple Bar, London, in total despair, doubting if he was even a Christian, although he had been ordained for thirteen years. He had been born into a God-fearing family: he and younger brother, Charles, were devoted sons; were honours students at Oxford University. They gave generously to charity, regularly visited the sick and ministered at Newgate Prison, comforting the condemned as they were on the scaffold. Despite these virtues, John Wesley declared that he '*was no better than the vilest offender in the kingdom*', because of a great burden of unworthiness he carried. What on earth made John Wesley so burdened with sin? Part of the answer occurred three years earlier.

In 1735, following the death of their father, John and Charles Wesley had sailed for Georgia, America with high hopes to be great evangelists, to win the Lord's favour with their success. However, instead, their ministries were marked by a series of scandals and tactless behaviour.

On one occasion John refused communion to a lady he courted, but who had married another man because John was hesitant about committing himself to her. He favoured total immersion at baptism and refused the sacrament to a woman who did not want her baby immersed. His enthusiasm culminated with John summoning his flock to church by going round the settlement early on the Sabbath, beating a drum loudly. He grew so unpopular that somebody fired a gun at him and, although the bullet missed, the Governor told the brothers to return forthwith to England. They reached home in February, 1738 with a profound sense of failure. Clearly, their efforts to gain salvation by works had not succeeded!

Both brothers were profoundly depressed, but John's gloom increased on 21st May, when Charles told him that he felt himself saved through the grace of God in Jesus. Therefore, on the evening of 24th May, John Wesley went to a Moravian service @ Aldersgate Street, London, where in his own words: *"In the evening, I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."*

The strange warming of his heart was the Holy Spirit taking charge. In today's epistle, Paul declared, *'Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.'* The Spirit assured John Wesley that he was freed from a sense of obligation to earn redemption for his sins and realised that forgiveness of sins and failure were God's free gift. That knowledge left the Wesleys free to serve God's call as a loving response to his graciousness and led to one of the greatest spiritual and social revolutions in British history. Realising that Jesus wanted them to minister to the outcasts and marginalized of society in the early Industrial Revolution, the Wesleys organised followers – like Jesus' seventy-two – to preach, create classes and support groups to bring Good News to parts of our industrial towns and villages that the established church daren't even enter! Methodism was as much a social movement as a worship movement, but it made a deep impression on British society as well as much further afield.

It is time to plan our future Church. Let us begin with ourselves and our own churches. Are we and they, open, welcoming, evangelistic, obedient and Spirit-led, hearts fired by Her power, or are our hearts barely-glowing-embers, fearful of or unwilling to change, because 'It's always been done this way'? Are we held back by our fear of failure? So were the disciples and the Wesleys, but the Spirit's power transformed them all.

Are you worried that new initiatives may change worship styles, or provoke changes to our properties? Early Christians adapted Hebrew worship and sang Psalms. Metrical Psalms were still sung instead of hymns long after writers like Isaac Watts penned their first hymns, but Charles Wesley's genius helped teach the gospel through song. Consider some of the worship songs from the 1970s and 1980s: they led a revolutionary change from the traditional, earlier hymns. The Spirit-led Church is both evolutionary and revolutionary and must be both if it is to survive. Let us trust in the One who trusted his Father would raise him from death, as well as his empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. Unbolt the doors of our fears, go out boldly and embrace the world beyond with His redemptive love, for the world is in sore need of love. Amen.

The third verse of our closing hymn, by Charles Wesley, provides a wonderful explanation of the idea of kenosis – God emptied out – in the verse, "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." The fourth verse, however, earned it the nickname, 'The Bicycle Hymn', in Tipton, because 'My chains fell off'!

StF 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?
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.
'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!
'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.
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.
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.

Charles Wesley

Benediction

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