

2nd May 2021 – Morning Service

Rev Chris Watson

Call to Worship

God stands with arms wide open, ready to welcome us home with an enormous hug. God sits with hands held out, ready to listen to our troubles and smooth our worries. God whoops with hands punching the sky, ready to delight and celebrate all that we can be. So come, worship the God who first loved us.

StF 503 – Love divine

- 1) Love divine, all loves excelling,
Joy of heaven to earth come down,
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,
All thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
Pure, unbounded love thou art;
Visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.
- 2) Come, almighty to deliver,
Let us all thy life receive;
Suddenly return, and never,
Never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
Serve thee as thy hosts above,
Pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
Glory in thy perfect love.
- 3) Finish then thy new creation,
Pure and spotless let us be;
Let us see thy great salvation,
Perfectly restored in thee:
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise!

Charles Wesley CCL No. 515642

Prayers

God of the past, we celebrate your presence with us. Your great mercy has led us, your great love has strengthened us. Our hearts are filled with joy as we recall your wonderful deeds. God of the past we cannot forget all you have done. God of the past you promise us a future. For all that we remember, you promise us something better. For all that we celebrate you promise greater joy. Your word of promise fills us with hope. Strengthen us now O God that we will not stay in the past but dare to embrace your future. Lord, you constantly surprise us by answering our prayers in ways we had not thought or asked, changing people's lives beyond all our expectations. We gasp at the joy we find in you in the face of evil and suffering. We marvel at your miraculous love bringing hope out of despair bringing health out of sickness bringing life out of death.

We need your miracles Lord, in a world stale with bad news. We need the miracles of the hidden power of your love, working secretly, slowly, unseen, in the hearts of humankind. Attracting governments and leaders to a vision of the future where nations will be ruled with justice, wisdom and care. Working secretly, slowly unseen, opening our eyes to see the plight of the hungry, opening our ears to hear the cries of the distressed, opening our hands to give where help is needed. Opening our hearts to love as you first loved us. Working secretly, slowly, unseen. Your Spirit within our churches disturbing us changing us, turning us outward pushing and pulling us on: we need the miracle of the hidden power of your love, working secretly, slowly, unseen. We need your miracles Lord, in a world stale with bad news. We need the miracles of your love that shock and shake us up. Coming suddenly, strangely in full view. The coming of a startling event that changes the way of a nation; the coming of one person that starts a freedom movement; the coming of a cry for help that leads to tremendous giving; the coming of life and health to the sick and depressed; the coming of forgiveness in a situation of hatred; the coming of God's Spirit afresh, into dreary exhausted lives.

We need the miracles of your love that shock and shake us up, coming suddenly, strangely in full view. Surprise us again Lord, work your miracles in us, work your miracles through us. In the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Reading: Psalm 22:1-5, 25-31

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises. In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfil my vows. The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the Lord will praise him – may your hearts live for ever! All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.

All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him – those who cannot keep themselves alive. Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

The set readings for this morning include the whole of Psalm 22 and part of the letter known as 1 John. The Psalm starts with words of despair but ends in triumph. If you read it carefully you could be forgiven for thinking it was an eyewitness account of the crucifixion, but it was written some 1000 years before the crucifixion, perhaps even before crucifixion as a way of execution had been invented. As the Psalm starts with a cry of despair, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' so does the crucifixion. As the Psalm ends on a note of triumph so Jesus cries on the cross, in triumph, 'It is finished!'. Perhaps we too, over recent months, have cried out to God in despair over the pandemic and all it has meant and changed in our lives. As times begin to change again, as the light glimmers more brightly at the end of the long tunnel so our despair can turn to joy, to praise to triumph.

StF 654 – The love of God comes close

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| 1) The love of God comes close
Where stands an open door
To let the stranger in,
To mingle rich and poor.
The love of God is here to stay,
Embracing those who walk his way. | 4) The grace of God comes close
To those whose grace is spent,
When hearts are tired or sore
And hope is bruised and bent.
The grace of God is here to stay,
Embracing those who walk his way. |
| 2) The peace of God comes close
To those caught in the storm,
Foregoing lives of ease
To ease the lives forlorn.
The peace of God is here to stay,
Embracing those who walk his way. | 5) The Son of God comes close
Where people praise his name,
Where bread and wine are blest
And shared as when he came.
The Son of God is here to stay,
Embracing those who walk his way. |
| 3) The joy of God comes close
Where faith encounters fears,
Where heights and depths of life
Are found through smiles and tears.
The joy of God is here to stay,
Embracing those who walk his way. | |

Reading: 1 John 4:7-21

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Saviour of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Sermon

Our reading from 1 John chapter 4 is said to be a letter or a written sermon to a church that was in conflict within itself, there had been a problem with false teachers who had now left the church, but their influence lingered. Part of their teachings seem to have included the idea that Jesus had not been truly God or truly human and so this cast doubt on the value of the crucifixion. It called into the question the whole notion of a loving God redeeming his people through the willing sacrifice of his Son. So the author of 1 John writes to emphasise and explain to those in doubt that God is love, his essence is love, He is love. Love is not something that God does, it is something that he is, so to know love is to know God, to be a child of God means one has to love, our link to God is through love.

Paul agrees with this in his letter to the church in Corinth, when he says that without love everything is worthless, a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal, without love we are nothing and our actions are empty. (1 Corinthians 13:1). Everything we do in worship is 'much ado about nothing' if it does not lead us to love. It has been said, that for us, as Christians, these three words - God is love - are the most important. They sum up all we believe and rely on; quite simply God is love.

What then is love? What do we mean when we claim that God is love?

We probably all have our own definitions of what love is, sometimes it's in the small things, the everyday gestures, the making of meals, the making of a drink, the quick hugs, the tone of voice, that special look. In our language we only have the one word which covers a multitude of different feelings and emotions. I could say I love my daughter and I love the pictures she makes, do they mean the same thing? I would love a holiday, I would love to see.....entirely different emotions and feelings are involved.

The Bible tells us that God is Love personified, he is love. How do we know this? He made us, look at the world he gave us to live in, the beauty of it all, look at the trees, the sky, grass and flowers. Look at the sky at night, the sunsets, the sunrises. If you look you will see we are surrounded by beauty. We have food in abundance, we have friends, family, we have music, literature, theatre, all extras to survival. When we turn away and go our own way God does not abandon us but waits for us to come back, he made a way back to himself for us. He became one of us, he died for each one of us as if we had been the only one needing him to do that.

So my question is what is love? Is it sentimentality shown in the buying of a card, is it spending money on flowers on chocolates? All very nice but if without real love all empty gestures.

Jesus says in John 15:13 - *Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

That is the answer, that is love. This is why God sent his son to die for us, this is why on the cross Jesus took everything on himself, this is why Jesus felt himself abandoned, this is why he called out in the opening words of Psalm 22 '*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*'

The cross has largely become a symbol, a piece of jewellery, something that stands in churches, often so familiar that we no longer see it. We have forgotten or have never really known what a truly terrible thing it was, a ghastly degrading form of execution. In these words of Jesus we are reminded of the true horror of his sacrifice. If the very character of God was not love Jesus would not have been willing to stand in our stead. God's love is unique, it is not directed just towards those who love him but even towards people who reject or ignore him. As his children, as his redeemed people, we begin to take on his character of love, indeed we are commanded to love each other as he has loved us.

Jesus tells the story of a Master who forgave his servant a massive debt, one he could not possibly have repaid. That same servant then meets one of his peers, who in turn owes him a debt, instead of writing off the debt, showing the same kindness he had received, he demands full payment. The second servant should have forgiven the debt as his debt had been forgiven. God loves us so we love.

We love because God first loved us, that love is boundless and overflows from God to us, to each other. God's love however is not reserved for those who respond favourably to it but he loves regardless of the response and so we are told to love those who are hard to love, we are told to love the unlovely, to love those we don't necessarily like or get on with. God is love, we are to show this love by the way we live, by our actions, by our words and in our motivations.

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. |

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Prayers of Intercession

Let us pray as citizens of heaven where God is Lord and King:

For the citizens of the world, whose rulers are human and fallible; for countries where governments oppress or exploit their citizens. For countries divided by barriers, of class, wealth, race or religion
For countries where people suffer the ravages of warfare or famine. We pray that in the governing of their citizens the rulers of the world may govern according to the will of the King of kings who is wisdom, justice, mercy and compassion.

Let us pray as citizens of heaven, brothers and sisters to Jesus Christ our Lord:
For those whom we, as servants in the kingdom of God, are called to love, that we might meet their needs and not our own. For those who have little status in the eyes of most, the destitute, the criminal the outcast. For those whose human rights have been infringed, the hungry, the persecuted, the tortured, the neglected. For those who find it hard to play a full role in society, for the unemployed, the lonely the housebound. For all those we know who are ill, or anxious or sad. For those facing the reality of the boundary between life and death. We pray that we may show that in God's kingdom there is comfort and healing, acceptance and hope, abundant life for all.

Let us pray as citizens of heaven whose lives are ruled by God's love:
For the church, that her members may be the people of the kingdom of God, remaining loyal to their vision of God through all the difficulties and compromises of life, for the institutions and committees of the church, that they might retain proper priorities, patience, wisdom and love. For ourselves that we may take up our Christian responsibilities with enthusiasm and in faith. We pray that the work and witness of the citizens of heaven past and present may speed the full coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

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 477 – Teach me to dance

*Ch) Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart,
Teach me to move in the pow'r of Your Spirit.
Teach me to walk in the light of Your presence,
Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.
Teach me to love with Your heart of compassion
Teach me to trust in the word of Your promise
Teach me to hope in the day of Your coming
Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart.*

2) Let all my movements express
A heart that loves to say 'Yes',
A will that leaps to obey You.
Let all my energy blaze
To see the joy in Your face
Let my whole being praise You,
Praise You.

1) You wrote the rhythm of life,
Created heaven and earth;
In You is joy without measure.
So like a child in Your sight,
I dance to see Your delight
For I was made for Your pleasure, pleasure.

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Blessing

God to enfold you, Christ to uphold you, Spirit to keep you in heaven's sight: so may God grace you, heal and embrace, lead you through darkness into light.

Amen