

8th February 2026 – Morning Service

True fasting

Rev Andrew Roberts

Prayers and Bible Notes taken from ROOTs resources

Gathering Prayer

God of this moment and of all time,
you call us to do more than just be here.
You call us to stand up for justice: **and we will.**
You call us to speak for the voiceless: **and we will.**
You call us to worship with integrity: **and we will.**
For you are our God and we are your people: **Amen.**

StF 17 – With gladness we worship

- 1) With gladness we worship, rejoice as we sing,
Free hearts and free voices how blessed to bring;
The old, thankful story shall scale thine abode,
Thou King of all glory, most bountiful God.
- 2) Thy right would we give thee-true homage thy due,
And honour eternal, the universe through,
With all thy creation, earth, heaven and sea,
In one acclamation we celebrate thee.
- 3) Renewed by thy Spirit, redeemed by thy Son,
Thy children revere thee for all thou hast done.
O Father! Returning to love and to light,
Thy children are yearning to praise thee aright.
- 4) We join with the angels, and so there is given
From earth Alleluia, in answer to heaven.
Amen! Be thou glorious below and above,
Redeeming, victorious, and infinite Love!

George Rawson

Prayer of Adoration

Living God, we celebrate your desire for justice and mercy. When others stay silent, we will speak up, for you are the living Word. When others stand down if things get tough we will stand up in the power of your Spirit, for you are our inspiration; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Prayer of Confession

Forgive us, merciful God, when we disappoint you with our complacency, our half-heartedness, our hypocrisy. Forgive us when we are all words and no action, or all action and no integrity. Forgive us when we let you down, when we let down those around us, when we let ourselves down. In Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Assurance of Forgiveness

Eternal God, in you we trust for grace to begin again, for faith to act justly, for strength to stand up courageously and for humility to recognise our need of all these things and more. **Amen.**

StF 254 – Seek ye first

- 1) Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia:
- 2) Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock and the door shall be opened unto you;
Allelu-, Alleluia:
- Ch) *Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia,*
Allelu-, Alleluia!
- 3) We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;
Allelu-, Alleluia:

Karen Lafferty © 1972 CCCM Music

Reading: Isaiah 58: 1-10 (NIV)

'Shout it aloud, do not hold back.
Raise your voice like a trumpet.
Declare to my people their rebellion
and to the descendants of Jacob their sins.
For day after day they seek me out;
they seem eager to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that does what is right
and has not forsaken the commands of its God.
They ask me for just decisions
and seem eager for God to come near them.
"Why have we fasted," they say,
"and you have not seen it?"
Why have we humbled ourselves,
and you have not noticed?"

'Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you
please
and exploit all your workers.
Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife,
and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today
and expect your voice to be heard on high.
Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for people to humble themselves?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying in sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the Lord?

'Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter –
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: here am I.

'If you do away with the yoke of oppression,
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,
and if you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,
then your light will rise in the darkness,
and your night will become like the noonday.

Reflection

Back in the land of Israel, the former exiles need a reminder of what should characterise the people of God. And in offering this oracle, the prophet gives one of the great rallying cries of biblical faith: this is the mark of God's people, championing justice and equality.

The prophet raises a shout against Judah's facile worship and complete misunderstanding of the reason for and nature of fasting. This chapter begins with an announcement about rebellion and possible judgement. The last announcement of this kind was in 48:20 where it had to do with Judah's redemption, but no sooner are they home than God's people are up to their old tricks, masking unjust living with a show of piety.

The prophet had declared God's free offer of food, sustenance for the journey, for those who gave up unrighteous ways (55:1-5). But here it is almost as if the people are bringing a counter suit against God: Why do you not acknowledge our fasting and show of piety? Why do you not acknowledge the humbling of ourselves in the Temple?

God's answer, of course, is simple: What you do in the Temple is irrelevant while you oppress your workers (v.3). God defines true fasting for all his people in every generation in verses 6-7. It has to do with the practical work of creating justice as far as you are able through paying fair wages and fair prices, through sharing your food with the hungry and your clothes with the naked, bringing the homeless into your own homes and breaking every yoke of oppression.

Reading: Matthew 5: 13-20 (NIV)

'You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

'You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practises and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Reflection

The Gospel reading, from the opening of the Sermon on the Mount, likens God's people to salt and light, only useful if people taste and see it for the righteous living that it is. In an echo of Isaiah and Micah, Jesus likens those who hear and grasp and join his band to a city set on a hill that, through its good works, will draw people to its light.

This is nothing new, says Jesus; it is what the Law and prophets taught, but people have not heeded this. Jesus stands in a long line of Israel's prophets calling God's people back to him. And echoing those prophets, Jesus calls us to a righteousness that exceeds the showy insubstantial righteousness of the religious leaders of his day.

StF 255 – The kingdom of God

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1) The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow. | 3) The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the good news, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ
to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss. |
| 2) The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The prisoners are freed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair. | 4) God's kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all! |

Bryn Rees © Alexander Scott

Address

In ten days' time it will be lent. I wonder if you are planning to give anything up? Chocolate? Social Media? Going to Church? A friend of mine once did give up going to Church for lent and spent the Sunday mornings of the season immersed in, and praying for, the local community. It proved to be an illuminating experience. And let me just say – just in case Revd Jem is reading this – I'm not necessarily recommending this practice...

In recent years there has been an increasing trend for people to take up something rather than give up something for lent. In many ways this connects with our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old

Testament) today. In Isaiah 58 the prophet is critical of those who give up food by fasting. In verse 3 they complain:

*Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and you have not seen it?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?'*

As if they are trying to curry favour with God by their apparently pious practice.

Isaiah is quick to point out their hypocrisy saying;

on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers.

Before declaring in verse 4;

*Your fasting ends in quarrelling and strife, and in striking each other with wicked fists.
You cannot fast as you do today and expect your voice to be heard on high.*

I remember once conducting a Good Friday service. We had entered deep into the story of the crucifixion, and the sense of God's presence was palpable. We ended the service in a deeply reverent silence. And then the quarrelling and strife began – in the kitchen over how the hot cross buns should be served. There was no striking with wicked fists, but I remember being so angry and so sad that for a few the politics of the Church kitchen seemed to be more important than the events of Good Friday that we had gathered to commemorate. Part of me would still rather not serve refreshments after Good Friday services but invite people to go home quietly.

For God, speaking through Isaiah, what mattered most and still matters most – is not what people give up but what people take up.

*"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?"*

(Isaiah 58: 6-7)

And therein lies the challenge for us, not just as we approach lent but in each and every season. The practices of piety – prayer, fasting, worship – matter, they matter very much. But so do the practices of justice, mercy and love (charity) – challenging injustice, releasing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. If the latter are not evident in our lives, it questions the reality, sincerity of the former. The two are inextricably linked.

I was once invited to do some work at Coventry Central Hall. I went to the city on the train and on the way out of the station I was approached by someone saying they were hungry and could I give them some money. I'm always wary of doing this as you never know what they will do with the money. Knowing that the Central Hall had a café – and knowing the route there was safe – I said, 'Tell you what I'm on my way to somewhere with a café, so if you'd like to come with me, I'll buy you breakfast.' Half expecting the person – politely or otherwise – to say no thanks, I was pleasantly surprised when they said thank you and came with me. I was also really taken with the way the folk at Central Hall welcomed the young man, fed him – a wonderful hearty cooked breakfast – and talked and prayed with him.

Now I'm not going to pretend I do that every time I leave a station – I don't. (And for safeguarding reasons I'm not suggesting you do that). But that day it was the right and safe thing to do and somehow my prayers seemed a bit more alive that day.

So back to my opening question. I wonder if you are planning to give anything up for lent? And I wonder what you and I might take up this lenten season. That helps to

*loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke?
to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
to clothe the naked, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?*

(Isaiah 58: 6-7 adapted)

For when we do so we will be a bit more the salt and light that Jesus spoke of in our Gospel reading.
May it be so. Amen.

StF 256 – When I needed a neighbour

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1) When I needed a neighbour
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a neighbour were you there? | 4) When I needed a shelter
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a shelter were you there? |
| Ch) <i>And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter
Were you there?</i> | 5) When I needed a healer
Were you there, were you there?
When I needed a healer were you there? |
| 2) I was hungry and thirsty
Were you there, were you there?
I was hungry and thirsty were you there? | 6) Wherever you travel
I'll be there, I'll be there
Wherever you travel I'll be there |
| 3) I was cold I was naked
Were you there, were you there?
I was cold I was naked were you there? | E) <i>And the creed and the colour
And the name won't matter
I'll be there</i> |

Sydney Carter © 1965 Stainer & Bell Ltd

A Prayer for Racial Justice Sunday

God of compassion, who sent Jesus Christ to deliver us from all manner of injustices and inequalities, create in us new hearts and enlarged visions to see your image in every person irrespective of background, race and ethnicity. May we be generous in our love of others as we work towards ending misunderstanding, racism and injustice; creating communities of human flourishing, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.**

Adapted from the book Christian Aid book *Rage & Hope: 75 Prayers for a Better World*, Edited by Chine McDonald

Prayers of Intercession

Let us offer our prayer with all God's people through Jesus Christ our Lord who ever lives to pray for us.

We pray for the needs of the world

- For peace and justice for all
- For conflicts to end
- For better care of creation
- For victims of injustice, modern slavery and oppression

We pray for the Church

- For this Church
- For our Circuit
- For all those who serve
- For those who are now housebound and who join us in prayer at home

We pray for all in trouble or distress

- For those we know and love personally
- For those who are homeless or hungry
- For those about whom we have heard in the news; for the victims of racism and sexual abuse, for those devastated by the effects of climate change; for those struggling to access the healthcare they need; for those without work.

We pray for all who make a new beginning today

- For those rejoicing in a new birth
- For those rejoicing in renewed faith
- For those starting a new job

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers. **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 407 – Hear the call of the kingdom

1) Hear the call of the kingdom,
lift your eyes to the King;
let his song rise within you
as a fragrant offering
of how God, rich in mercy,
came in Christ to redeem
all who trust in his unfailing grace.

*Ch) King of heaven, we will answer the call.
We will follow, bringing hope to the world,
filled with passion,
filled with power to proclaim
salvation in Jesus' name.*

2) Hear the call of the kingdom
to be children of light
with the mercy of heaven,
the humility of Christ;
walking justly before him,
loving all that is right,
that the life of Christ may shine through us.

3) Hear the call of the kingdom
to reach out to the lost
with the Father's compassion
in the wonder of the cross,
bringing peace and forgiveness,
and a hope yet to come:
let the nations put their trust in him.

Keith & Kristyn Getty and Stuart Townend © 2006 Thankyou Music

A Sending Out Prayer

Ever-present God, as we leave our time of worship, may we also take on the challenge of hearing your call to justice, and know that we do not leave that behind when we leave here. May we know true worship that brings growth, spreads light, and lifts the oppressed, and know that we do not leave that behind when we leave here. **Amen.**