

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 7

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Edward Russell Smith, “Tedd” to his friends. He was born and raised in Ontario, Canada, but became an American citizen and served as pianist for Billy Graham’s Crusades for more than thirty-five years, travelling the world as a result. We shall sing hymn number 36, ‘There’s a quiet understanding’.

**1. There’s a quiet understanding
When we’re gathered in the Spirit,
It’s a promise that he gives us,
When we gather in his name.
There’s a love we feel in Jesus,
There’s a manna that he feeds us,
It’s a promise that he gives us,
When we gather in his name.**

**2. And we know when we’re together,
Sharing love and understanding,
That our brothers and our sisters
Feel the oneness that he brings.
Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jesus,
For the way you love and feed us,
For the many ways you lead us;
Thank you, thank you, Lord;
Thank you, thank you, Lord.**

© Tedd Smith (b. 1927)

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Almighty God all glory, honour, power and praise are yours, for you are the living Word who spoke our universe to life; you made the earth on which we live and not only created human beings, but honoured us with stewardship of this beautiful planet. Through your great faithfulness, you sustain us and all living things. In your love, you call us to you as your earthly sons and daughters, offering us a covenant of love and faithfulness.

You know everything about us and, despite our sinfulness, you love us so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, so we might understand how you want us live. His death and resurrection have broken the power of sin and death, offering us a special new relationship with you and the offer of everlasting life through faith in him. O loving God, we ask you to remove all distractions and anxieties, so we can offer you the best in our worship today.

Heavenly Father, we come to offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we don’t love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. Forgive us when we say and do things that cause offence to and hurt

our neighbours, then help us to lead better lives, for Jesus said if we repent in his name, you will pardon us.

Merciful Lord, as you hear and answer our prayers, we believe that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you. May we do so, serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, in order that we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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.

We shall continue our worship as we sing a hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green a long-lived Methodist minister and prolific hymn-writer. This hymn was written for a harvest thanksgiving service in 1968 and was entitled, 'The uniqueness of Christ'. We sing hymn number 346, 'Christ is the world's Light,'

1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;

Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.

If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:

Glory to God on high.

2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;

No one can serve him and despise another.

Who else unites us, one in God the Father?

Glory to God on high.

3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;

Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –

He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:

Glory to God on high.

4. Give God the glory, God and none other;

Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;

Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:

Glory to God on high.

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000} StF version

In our prayers of intercession we pray for the needs of ourselves and others.

When I say 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'Hear our prayer'.

Lord of all, thank you for this beautiful planet upon which we live, for it ought to allow everybody to live in the abundance of your creation. However, we know the earth has been abused by human foolishness, greed and, worst of all, our indifference. The effects of climate change are becoming abundantly clear, with series of heatwaves and drought, melting ice caps and severe floods. Show us how to use resources thoughtfully and carefully, so we may play our part in helping the world recover from the damage we have done over several centuries. Help us preserve a habitable world for future generations.

'Lord, in your mercy', 'Hear our prayer'.

Loving Lord and Prince of Peace, we ask you to inspire leaders of nations to turn away from using violence when they can't have their own way and bid them seek justice and mercy for those they govern. We ask for swift and just conclusions to wars that are being waged at present, especially in the Holy Land, Ukraine, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. In grief, we remember all victims of conflicts, discrimination,

injustice and violence, praying that they find peace, safety, refuge and security, in order to rebuild their lives.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,‘Hear our prayer’.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we remember people who are sick, lonely, fearful, troubled and broken in our community, for those whose lives are coming to an end and everybody who mourns the loss of loved-ones. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you already know their needs and will reach out to them.....

Help us to offer them practical support and friendship, but also enfold them in your merciful arms, that they may find healing, hope, comfort and an enduring peace.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,‘Hear our prayer’.

Almighty God, we pray for this church, churches in local Circuits and the World Church, that we may serve you in Spirit, love and truth. Unite us all in mission, so we help build up your kingdom with acts of grace and goodness. May we find ways of bringing good news to a world that dearly needs it.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,‘Hear our prayer’.

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe and fill our hearts to overflowing with your love. Then help us share it freely with both friends and strangers, in Jesus’ wonderful name. Amen.

Our penultimate hymn is believed by some commentators to have been the Wesleys’ Conversion hymn, rather than ‘Where shall my wondering soul begin’ and it was certainly a favourite of John Wesley. It was certainly my conversion hymn when I sang it at Cannon Street Baptist Church as a sixteen-year-old at a crossroad in my faith. Hymn number 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?**

**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.**

**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!**

**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.**

**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!**

© Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 21 verses 23 to 32

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replied,
“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves and said,
“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

So they answered Jesus,
“We don’t know.”

Then he said,
“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered,

‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them,
“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Graham Kendrick 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. Hymn number 272, ‘The Servant King’.

**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. Chorus:**

***This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,***

*To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.*

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. *Chorus:*

3. Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered. *Chorus:*

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. *Chorus:*

© Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

Sermon: “*“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.*’ **Matthew 21:23**

Some political commentators question the authority of Andy Burnham, following the forced resignation of Sir Kier Starmer without a general election. However, Boris Johnson won a General Election with a commanding majority, but was replaced by Liz Truss and, a month and a half later by Mr Sunak. Both were appointed without a general election which is within parliamentary rules, but I shall leave the issue to constitutional lawyers, with a simple observation that I do not covet being Prime Minister, because of the massive issues they face.

There are some parallels with legitimate authority in our reading from Matthew, for Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the acclamation of crowds, as a Messianic figure. at the beginning of Pessach, or Passover, a festival when feelings ran high and rioting had often occurred. He had driven the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals from the temple, exclaiming, “**It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers!’**” Clearly, the chief priests and elders felt the authority of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, was being threatened by this Nazarene, whom they saw as a demagogue, a false Messiah. Needless to say, they questioned his authority. However, it is too easy to simply dismiss the Sanhedrin as stupid, but their prejudice had some foundation.

For a start, Jesus came from the region of Galilee, where many Gentiles lived, so Galilean Jews were considered inferior to Judeans. In addition, in the recent past a number of false Messiahs had arrived in Jerusalem from Galilee, which was a hot-bed of anti-Roman agitators. To the chief priests and elders, Christ had the potential to lead an uprising against Rome which would provoke savage retribution. Although the Sanhedrin was not stupid, it was spiritually blind, for the teaching of John the Baptist was known to them and John had declared that he was preparing the way for the coming Messiah, calling for repentance and baptising huge crowds. Despite Jesus having preached and healed in a way that pointed to his being the Son of God, the Jewish Establishment, wanted incontrovertible evidence – signs of Messianic might. Moreover, Jesus’ outreach to groups they despised, the tax-collectors, prostitutes, the ceremonially unclean, even Gentiles and Samaritans served to confirm their opinion that he was a false prophet, so their only interest was to trap him into making a seditious, or blasphemous remark, so they could destroy him.

That is why Jesus’ reply to the Sanhedrin’s challenge to his authority was remarkable. He agreed to answer their question – a rabbinic technique – on condition they answered

his: **“John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”** Of course, if they replied, **‘From heaven’**, Jesus would ask why they didn’t believe John’s teaching about the Messiah: on the other hand, if they said, **‘From men’**, they would outrage the crowd, who believed John the Baptist was a prophet, thus inspired by God. They saw that they could not answer Jesus’ question and so were silenced, but Jesus then launched into an attack with his parable of the two sons, in which a vineyard owner asked his two sons to spend the day working in his vineyard; the first was rude and rebellious in his refusal, but later thought better of his answer, turned back and did his father’s will, whilst the second, who pretended to be obedient, went and did as he pleased. The parable showed two groups of people: sinners who repented – and the self-righteous who appear obedient in words, but whose deeds show their true feelings – and their disobedience.

When Jesus asked which of the sons obeyed their father, the high priests and elders realised that Jesus was teaching that penitent sinners would become members of God’s kingdom, whilst they and others who had heard John’s message but refused to act on it would not. They were guilty of pride, rejecting Jesus because of his outreach to the untouchables in society. Indeed, they could not – or would not – see that the man whose authority they challenged was God himself in human form – in Charles Wesley’s words, **‘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:’** Are we guilty of similar pride when we fail to answer Christ’s call to respond to his grace by serving him? In the Lerner and Loewe musical, “My Fair Lady”, the heroine, Eliza Doolittle expressed her exasperation with Freddy Eynsford-Hill’s declaration of love: **“Don’t talk of stars burning above, / If you’re in love, / Show me! / Tell me no dreams filled with desire, / If you’re on fire, / Show me!”** In other words, actions speak louder than words.

I am sure God feels the same when people go to church, pray earnestly, sing hymns lustily and listen intently to the sermon, then do nothing about it! I readily acknowledge that I was as bad as anyone, for I heard Christ’s call to become a local preacher ten years before I answered it. I gave a host of seemingly reasonable excuses for not answering my call and thought myself safe. Imagine my surprise after a Christmas Day service in 1993, when I had read the lesson, instead of bidding me a happy Christmas, Deacon Jane Day poked me in the chest and declared, **“You’ve been called to preach, haven’t you?”** I reeled off my excuses, only to be told, **“If Jesus wants you, he’ll give you the time and gifts you need; so answer the call!”** She gave me no chance to renege, because two days later the Superintendent Minister called at my house and two hours later I had a note to preach. I swiftly recognised the privilege of answering Christ’s call, which is why I did not hesitate when I saw the advertisement for a Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Wednesfield MHA, because I knew I was being called again. Apart from marrying Carol, it was probably the best decision I have ever made – and I thank God from the depths of my soul!

If you are experiencing a call to serve our Lord, in whatever capacity, answer it without procrastination, for our God who emptied himself out and died to redeem us will indeed use us – in the power of the Holy Spirit – when we serve him. Don’t be put off by doubts or false modesty, for as Deacon Jane told me, **“If Jesus wants you, he’ll give you the time and gifts you need; so answer the call!”** The COVID pandemic, financial crises, wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, as well as the climate crisis have changed the world. Many people, here and abroad are experiencing heart-breaking difficulties: the rising cost of living; anxiety and depression and a sense of impotence in controlling our future. We can’t put everything right alone, but we need to explore ways

where we can help – and then act as individuals or, better still as a church. We are saved by faith, but of what value is faith to us if we choose not to respond to our Saviour's grace? So, let us turn our hearts to Jesus and play our part in his kingdom's work. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Sydney Carter, for the choir of Southwark Cathedral to sing and dance. It quickly became popular in the days when schools had religious assemblies. We shall sing hymn number 247, 'Lord of the dance'.

1. I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun;
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth –
At Bethlehem I had my birth. *Chorus:*

*'Dance, then, wherever you may be;
I am the Lord of the Dance,' said he.
'And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance,' said he.*

2. I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me.
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John –
They came with me and the dance went on. *Chorus:*

3. I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame;
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,
And they left me there on a cross to die. *Chorus:*

4. I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black –
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone,
But I am the dance and I still go on. *Chorus:*

5. They cut me down and I leapt up high;
I am the life that'll never, never die:
I'll live in you if you'll live in me –
'I am the Lord of the Dance,' said he. *Chorus:*

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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 evermore. Amen.