

Call to worship: Psalm 119 verses 33 to 36

Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at all times. Explain your law to me, and I will obey it; I will keep it with all my heart. Keep me obedient to your commandments, because in them I find happiness. Give me the desire to obey your laws rather than to get rich. Amen.

Our opening hymn was published in 1834 by Revd. Henry Lyte, the Rector of Lower Brixham in Devon. It is a fine paraphrase of Psalm 103 and was loved by our late Queen. However, However, Henry Lyte was not satisfied, because he wanted to write something that he could leave behind to 'live to the glory of God'; a hymn that would not be ephemeral, so in 1847, two months before his death, he wrote 'Abide with me'! Hymn number 83, 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'.

1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;

To his feet thy tribute bring;

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,

Who like thee his praise shall sing?

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise the everlasting King!

2. Praise him for his grace and favour

To our fathers in distress;

Praise him still, the same for ever,

Slow to chide, and swift to bless.

Praise him! Praise him!

Glorious in his faithfulness.

3. Father-like, he tends and spares us;

Well our feeble frame he knows;

In His hands he gently bears us,

Rescues us from all our foes.

Praise him! Praise him!

Widely as his mercy flows.

4. Angels in the height, adore him,

Ye behold him face to face;

Sun and moon, bow down before him,

Dwellers all in time and space.

Praise him! Praise him!

Praise with us the God of grace!

© Henry Francis Lyte {1793 – 1847}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, King of creation, Lord of Glory, you are a God of wisdom, might and love, who despite our sinfulness, has striven to draw us close to you. After we had defied you and made ourselves your enemies, at the right time you came as Jesus Christ to teach us how we should live through his words and actions of love. His life, death and resurrection have broken the power of sin and death, offering us eternal life through faith in him, not as something we deserve or can earn. Amazing God, as we come before your throne of grace, take away all our anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit, love and truth.

Thank you, Lord, for this wonderful world on which we live, for the many blessings we receive from you, including our homes, food, family and friends. Above all these blessings, thank you for loving us even when we are unfaithful, disobedient, selfish, loveless and unlovable, for whilst you are holy, our lives are marred by our sinfulness.

Merciful Lord, we confess that, however hard we try, we still say and do things that upset and hurt our neighbours and fill you with grief. We don't always love and serve you wholeheartedly and we certainly don't always care for other people as we would like them to care for us. Help us to change our ways, to become more loving and faithful day by day and, in Jesus' lovely name, pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Merciful heavenly Father, we believe that you hear our prayer and have breathed forgiveness upon us. Help us, Lord, to respond to your grace by loving and serving both you and our neighbours wholeheartedly and faithfully, in Jesus' holy 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.

Our second hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year. Hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak. *Chorus:*
*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:***

***Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.***

**3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain. *Chorus:***

**4. Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:***

**5. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of your ways,
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus:***

© Graham Kendrick (born 1950)

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

Lord of all, despite your intention that this beautiful planet upon which we live ought to allow all to live in the abundance of your creation, the earth has been abused by our foolishness, greed and indifference. The effects of climate change are abundantly clear, with series of heatwaves and droughts resulting in water-shortages, reduced crops, wildfires, here and abroad. We pray for our world, especially all places where extreme weather poses an ever-greater threat. Encourage us to use the earth's resources thoughtfully and carefully, so we play our part in helping the world to recover for the damage we have done over generations.

God our Saviour, hear our prayer for the victims of earthquakes in Columbia, Venezuela and Japan, for the catastrophic flooding in Nepal and Tibet. Bless and protect the rescuers, recovery teams and relief-workers in those lands. May you strengthen and comfort them.

Loving Lord, we ask you to inspire leaders of nations to turn away from violence when they can't have their own way and to 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 and Iran and, at the same time, we remember victims of conflicts, discrimination, injustice and violence, asking that they may find peace, support, refuge and security.

Lord, we pray for our leaders in both national and local government. Grant them vision, wisdom and courage to address the needs of our communities and co-operate with opponents, rather than seeking political advantage. Help them to lead through consensus, rather than by sowing division, so that our polarized society will be healed. May current levels of Islamophobia and antisemitism diminish, so neighbours of whatever background are able to live in security and peace.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we bring our concerns to you for people who are ill, for all who are lonely, troubled and afraid, for those whose lives are coming to an end as well as all who are grieving 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 and enfold them into your merciful arms, that they may find healing, hope, comfort and enduring peace.

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 in mission, so we help build up your kingdom with acts of grace and goodness.

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe and warm our hearts, so we may share your abundant love with friends and strangers, in Jesus' wonderful name. Amen.

We shall continue with a hymn written by Jean Holloway, sung to the lovely Welsh melody "All through the night", or "Ar hyd y nos". Jean Holloway is the American-born wife of a former Scottish Episcopal Church Bishop of Edinburgh, Rt. Revd. Richard Holloway. We shall sing hymn number 652, 'Lord, we come to ask your healing'.

**1. Lord, we come to ask your healing,
Teach us of love;
All unspoken shame revealing,
Teach us of love.
Take our selfish thoughts and actions,**

Petty feuds, divisive factions,
Hear us now to you appealing,
Teach us of love.

2. Soothe away our pain and sorrow,
Hold us in love;
Grace we cannot buy or borrow,
Hold us in love.
Though we see but dark and danger,
Though we spurn both friend and stranger,
Though we often dread tomorrow,
Hold us in love.

3. When the bread is raised and broken,
Fill us with love;
Words of consecration spoken,
Fill us with love.
As our grateful prayers continue,
Make the faith that we have in you
More than just an empty token,
Fill us with love.

4. Help us live for one another,
Bind us in love;
Stranger, neighbour, father, mother –
Bind us in love.
All are equal at your table,
Through your Spirit make us able
To embrace as sister, brother,
Bind us in love.

© Jean Holloway (born 1939)

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 20

“If your brother or sister sins against you, go to them and show them their fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If they listen to you, you have won your brother or sister back. But if they will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. And if they will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if they will not listen to the church, treat them as though they were a pagan or a tax collector.

And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”
Amen.

“In blazing light your cross reveals / The truth we dimly knew, / How small the debts men owe to us, / How great our debt to you!” Wonderful words by a retired Leeds schoolteacher, Rosamond Herklots, who began the hymn whilst she was weeding her nephew’s garden. We shall sing hymn number 423, ““Forgive our sins as we forgive,””

1. ‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’,
You taught us, Lord, to pray,

**But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.**

**2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?**

**3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!**

**4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.**

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

Sermon: *“If your brother or sister sins against you, go to them and show them their fault.”* Matthew 18:15
Luke’s idyllic picture of the newly-created Church in Acts, with members sharing possessions, eating together, praying together and caring for one another, must have happened, for unless it was true, its dynamic growth would have swiftly ended. Early Christians were fired by enthusiasm and a belief that Christ would return shortly in glory to judge the world. However, by the time Paul wrote his letters to early churches, changes had already occurred. There was tension between Jewish and Gentile converts in the churches of Rome. As for the churches in Corinth, Paul felt it necessary to write three letters appealing for unity. (2 Corinthians is actually two letters combined).

The churches of Corinth were very diverse in membership: Jewish and Gentile converts; wealthy, influential women; slaves and freedmen; literate and illiterate. As a result, they argued about virtually everything: whose preaching they favoured; whether or not they should observe Hebrew customs and traditions; whether or not women should cover their heads and not wear their hair down; eating customs and prohibited food; worship styles; the role of women in church life; the relative importance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially speaking in tongues and interpreting what was spoken. Shared meals, the fore-runner of Holy Communion was shambolic – food was not shared, so the wealthy ate and drank to excess whilst slaves stood by hungry and thirsty. Had it been a cruise ship, the Corinthian churches would have been racing towards the rocks and destruction!

Sadly, the story didn’t end there: schism and divisions have marked our history and dissenters were often persecuted and in some cases put to death for their beliefs. Methodism, too, has had its divisions, with the development of Wesleyan, Primitive, United and New Connexion factions, though fortunately without bloodshed! Union in 1932 officially ended these divisions, but some older members of our churches still regard themselves as Wesleyan or Primitives.

What do we learn from this? Christians are just as susceptible to disagreements and fallings out as other groups, so Jesus’ teaching in our passage from Matthew is extremely apt. Christ taught us how to deal with people who sin against us, to give the offender as many chances to repent as possible. Originally, the text did not specify that the sin had to be against us, so the Lord’s intention is that we ought to confront a fellow-disciple about a personal fault, rather than ignoring it, in hope that the guilty party would repent, that is turn away from their wrongdoing and be restored to righteousness. You are looking to the spiritual restoration of your friend rather than exposing them and

punishing them. Often a quiet, private word will be enough to set someone back on the straight and narrow. Legalism is replaced by love.

If an individual approach is unsuccessful, Jesus advocated that we ought to have two or three witnesses attempt to add force to the case against the wrongdoer. Please note that this is not intended to be a legal trial, as in Deuteronomy chapter 19, but as a means of convincing the wrongdoer of his or her error. The idea is to restore the wrongdoer to the church, much as you might restore a stray sheep to the flock without punishing it. The process is of patient argument, not to punish or shame the sinner. Only if these measures fail should you take matters to the church, the Christian community, not for the church to sit in judgement, but to appeal to the wrongdoer to listen to reason and repent. The church is not to adjudicate in the matter, not to take disciplinary action, but to bear witness to the dispute in the hope that the offender will repent. By so-doing the church will give an offender every opportunity to remain in fellowship and only if all attempts fail will they be ostracized in the same way as Jews shunned tax collectors and pagans. The door remains open for the offender to repent, but if he / she doesn't, their isolation is of their own doing, not the church's.

This is a lesson for us not to rush to judgement, to take sides, to seek to punish transgressor, but to give them every opportunity to turn from their error. Indeed, if they listen to the individual or small group's appeal, then they are not shamed publically and have an opportunity to set things right quickly, without fuss. The church benefits because it retains a member who would have been lost and it maintains harmony. Also, the church won't have turned a blind eye to sin, but will have faced it with concern for the sinner. Remember, God hates sin, but loves us sinners! It was the depth of his love for sinners that Christ died for us. God's arms are open wide to embrace all who turn from wrongdoing to him.

Now, at this point I must give a note of caution. If a church member is seen to be abusing another, whether it be financially, emotionally, morally, physically, or sexually, we cannot follow the above procedures. Safeguarding rules prohibit it and we must report any instance of abuse to the church or Circuit Safeguarding Officer. If we don't, we will be treated as accomplices. Any accusation must be investigated rigorously and we remember what has happened in the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches in the last few years, with the forced resignations of bishops and the last Archbishop of Canterbury. The resulting bad publicity has done the Church serious harm and we must do our best to prevent our church from such damage.

In the final paragraph Jesus linked heavenly and earthly judgement through Christ, who guides our decision-making. The words, **'whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them'**, uses a rabbinic idea that **'if two sit together and words or the Law are between them, the Shekinah, (God's presence), rests between them'**. Jesus was telling them that if two or three Christians gather together, then he will be there to hear and guide them. The same applies to us.

Jesus appeals to us to stand up for what is good and true, but to avoid legalism and condemnation. He calls us to give transgressors every chance to return to the fold. We all fall short of what we know we ought to be, but God is gracious and forgiving if we repent, but we should in turn offer our brothers and sisters forgiveness and grace if they turn away from the wrong they have done. Legalism won't change people's lives, but patient loving-kindness can and does. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Sydney Carter who served with the Friends Ambulance Unit in the Second World War, alongside Donald Swann, one half of the entertainers Flanders and Swann, for whom Sydney wrote material in the 1950s and 1960s. Our hymn was written for the School of Southwark Cathedral in 1971 and was published in “Riding a Tune” that year. It was selected for the Baptist Supplement for “Praise for Today” in 1974 and swiftly became popular, first in schools, then in mainstream worship. Hymn number 476, ‘One more step along the world I go’.

**1. One more step along the world I go,
One more step along the world I go;
From the old things to the new
Keep me travelling along with you: *Chorus:*
*And it’s from the old I travel to the new;
Keep me travelling along with you.***

**2. Round the corner of the world I turn,
More and more about the world I learn;
All the new things that I see
You’ll be looking at along with me: *Chorus:***

**3. As I travel through the bad and good,
Keep me travelling the way I should;
Where I see no way to go
You’ll be telling me the way, I know: *Chorus:***

**4. Give me courage when the world is rough,
Keep me loving though the world is tough;
Leap and sing in all I do,
Keep me travelling along with you: *Chorus:***

**5. You are older than the world can be,
You are younger than the life in me;
Ever old and ever new,
Keep me travelling along with you: *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.