

A service for 1st October, 2023 (StF)

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 reminds us of our need for the light of God's grace to guide us. 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. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

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. Chorus:

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

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. Chorus:

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. Chorus:

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. Chorus:

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. Chorus:

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

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 our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, our hopes and fears 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 broke 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, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Lord of life', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things we enjoy and experiences that fulfil us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Lord of life, have mercy on us.

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and when we do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought to do. In Jesus' precious name, help us to change our ways, so we lead Christ-centred and not self-centred lives, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Lord of life, have mercy on us.

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. From now on may we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' glorious name. Amen.

Let us say the prayer our Lord taught us:

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 our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say ‘Your kingdom come’, please respond with, ‘Your will be done’.

Heavenly Father, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but there are circumstances where we know the best we can offer is not enough, so we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

Faithful God, hear our prayer for this church, the churches in our Circuit, the presbyters, local preachers, worship leaders, administrators and those who hold responsibilities in our churches. Grant them the spiritual grace, energy, compassion, courage and vision to lead where you want the Church to go. May we proclaim good news boldly and find new ways of engaging our community.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

Gracious God, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that they seek justice and mercy in their dealings. Help us stand up against poverty, here and abroad, to see others as you see them, as your children who are to be protected and nurtured. Help us to be willing to work together in mutual trust, to always seek the common good, rather than our own selfish desires and to share justly the earth’s resources, rather than fighting over them.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather.

Remember in your mercy victims of disasters and famines, thinking in particular of those affected by the recent earthquake in Morocco and the collapse of two dams in Libya. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the countries afflicted by famine and natural disasters. Warm the hearts of governments of wealthy countries to give assistance to victims of disasters and bless the work done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we pray for people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and may you embrace them in your love, which offers healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’.**

Lord of all, hear our prayer for peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead good lives but to take the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

Our first reading is Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 13

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Amen.

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

There are many reasons I am glad I am not the Prime Minister and not just because there are so many crises to resolve. Irrespective of our political viewpoint, Rishi Sunak is in an unenviable position when it comes to his authority, for opponents will gleefully observe that it was Boris Johnson who won the General Election with a commanding majority, but he 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 which gives opponents the opportunity to question the legitimacy of their premiership, though, to be even-handed, it must be noted the last Labour Government changed leaders without holding an election.

There are some parallels with 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.

Then 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, 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 argued to myself that, even if I had the ability to fulfil my calling – which I doubted – I certainly had no time to devote to it: I was far too busy. 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!”** COVID and global warming have changed the world. Many people, here and abroad are experiencing heart-breaking difficulties: pollution; the rising cost of living; anxiety and depression and a sense of powerlessness. 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 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!**

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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.