

A service for 3rd May, 2026 Easter 5 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 118 verses 24 to 27

This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O LORD, save us; O LORD, grant us success. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD. From the house of the LORD we bless you. The LORD is God, and he has made his light shine upon us. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1984 for Spring Harvest by Graham Kendrick, who is amongst the most published hymn-writers today. Born in 1950, a son of a Baptist pastor, Graham has spent more or less all of his adult life working to promote the Christian faith, first as Musical Director of British Youth for Christ between 1976 and 1980, then in 1984 with the Ichthus Christian Fellowship. This hymn was written after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant. We shall sing 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)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Creator of life throughout the universe, our eyes bear witness to your might and glory in the beauty and complexity of life on earth and the vastness of space, all of which is sustained by your love. We come to worship you with reverence and joy as we continue to celebrate the resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who died at Calvary as the One perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Through his resurrection, Jesus offers us everlasting life through faith in him, so death no longer has the final word and we are free to serve you because we want to not through compulsion. May we set aside distractions and anxieties, so we may offer you the cream of our worship today, In Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, ‘Lord, in your mercy,’ please respond with ‘Hear our prayer’.

Loving Lord, accept our praise and thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which we live, for all the blessings we receive from you, for continuing to love us even when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient, but most of all, for Jesus Christ without whom we are hopeless and helpless.

Merciful God, we confess that we don't live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly. We certainly do not always love our neighbours as we love ourselves and, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience, we know how deeply we grieve you and add to the world's brokenness. Forgive us, Lord and help us change our ways.

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

Loving Lord, warm and mould our hearts and guide us to live as you want us to by obeying your call to serve our neighbours with compassion and generosity of spirit.

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

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus, unburdened by guilt. May we love and serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of our risen Lord Jesus. 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 next hymn was written by John Newton, who led a vile life as a slave trader, until he took Christ as his Saviour, after which he became a vicar in the Church of England and was one of the leading campaigners who ended slavery in the British Empire. We shall sing hymn number 322, ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds’.

1. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

In a believer's ear!

**It soothes our sorrows, heals our wounds,
And drives away our fear.**

2. It makes the wounded spirit whole,

And calms the troubled breast;

'Tis manna to the hungry soul,

And to the weary, rest,

3. Dear name – the rock on which I build,

My shield and hiding-place,

My never-failing treasury, filled

With boundless stores of grace!

4. Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,

My Prophet, Priest and King,

My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,

Accept the praise I bring.

5. Weak is the effort of my heart,

**And cold my warmest thought;
But when I see thee as thou art, / I'll praise thee as I ought.**

**6. Till then I would thy love proclaim
With every fleeting breath;
And may the music of thy name
Refresh my soul in death.**

© John Newton (1725 – 1807)

We come to our prayer of intercession, for people nearby and far away.

Heavenly Father, although we have a wonderful, fruitful and self-sustaining world, we are painfully aware of its brokenness, much of which is the result of our failure to live as we are intended to. Help us to play our part in making the world a better place by serving you faithfully with hearts guided by the Holy Spirit. May we be your earthly hands, serving others and caring for our environment. Lord, we know how limited our power is, but yours is infinite, so we pray that you will warm the hearts of and inspire people who possess greater influence and power to heal situations that are too complex for us.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are troubled and needy. We pray for just endings to conflicts, especially in Ukraine, Iran, the Holy Land and Lebanon. Guide the leaders of nations to act wisely and govern with justice and mercy, so that lasting peace will prevail in the world. Help us to remember that peace begins with us, so we strive to live in harmony with our neighbours, including those we find it difficult to like.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life, debt failed relationships or addiction and bereavement. Loving Lord, let us be part of the answer to our prayer, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they experience healing, comfort, hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Lord, we pray for this church, churches in our Circuit and the World Church. May we learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. Unite us in outreach and help us bear the gospel light to a world darkened by materialism, sin and want. Grant us the faith we need to answer our call to serve the risen Lord.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, help us sharing the abundance of your love with friends and strangers alike, so we glorify the name of our risen Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

The first reading is Acts chapter 7 verses 51 to 60

Stephen declared,

“You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him—you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”

When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

“Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the

witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep. Amen.

Our next hymn comes from the second part of "The Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan, a Congregationalist who was imprisoned in Bedford Gaol for preaching without a licence. "Who would true valour see" is a poem recited by Mr. Valiant-for-Truth to Mr. Great-Heart as they approached the Enchanted Ground. It was first published as a hymn in E. Paxton Hood's "Our Hymn Book" in 1873, then in the 1916 editions of "Hymns Ancient and Modern" and Congregational Hymnary. We shall sing hymn number 486, 'Who would true valour see'.

**1. Who would true valour see,
let him come hither;
one here will constant be,
come wind, come weather;
there's no discouragement
shall make him once relent
his first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.**

**2. Whoso beset him round
with dismal stories,
do but themselves confound;
his strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
he'll with a giant fight,
but he will have the right
to be a pilgrim.**

**3. Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
can daunt his spirit;
he knows he at the end
shall life inherit.
Then, fancies, fly away,
he'll not fear what men say;
he'll labour night and day
to be a pilgrim.**

© John Bunyan [1628 – 1688]

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 14 verses 1 to 7

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him,

"Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?"

Jesus answered,

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." Amen.

Our next hymn was translated by Dermott Monahan, the son of a Methodist missionary who trained at Handsworth Theological College and spent most of his life in what is now Pakistan. The words were originally written in Urdu, though they are based upon St. John's gospel, and the melody is a Pakistani folk-tune. We shall sing hymn number 252, 'Jesus the Lord said: "I am the bread,"'

1. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.
The Bread of Life for the world am I,
The Bread of Life for the world am I.'
Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Bread,
The Bread of Life for the world am I'.

2. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Vine –
The true and fruitful Vine am I.'

3. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Way,
The true and living Way am I.'

4. Jesus the Lord said, 'I am the Light,
The one true Light of the world am I.'

5. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Life,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'
The Resurrection and the Life am I,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'
Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Life,
The Resurrection and the Life am I.'

© tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57)

Sermon: *"I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."* Acts 7:56

I am frequently described as pedantic, for as a former English teacher, I take exception to casual misuse of words, especially when the Media reports the killing of a hostage by a criminal gang, or terrorists, as an 'execution', instead of 'murder'. The victim has not been condemned by a legal process – whether or not we believe in capital punishment; nor are the killers authorised to take life. **I am even more offended when I hear suicide-bombers described as martyrs, because the Oxford Dictionary defines a martyr as one who undergoes death or suffering for obedience to the Christian faith, the Church, or any great cause, not one who causes suffering or death in God's name.** I would go as far to say that I consider the description of suicide-bombers as martyrs, little short of blasphemous and I believe that most ordinary Moslems share my view.

Stephen did not seek his own death, though he must have realised that his testimony would bring down the wrath of the Sanhedrin upon him. His case was not helped because he was a Gentile, rather than a Jewish Christian and so his assertion that Jesus was the Messiah who would radically change the traditions handed down from Moses and offer salvation to all peoples was interpreted as a direct threat against Judaism. When he was brought before the Sanhedrin, Stephen denounced the faithlessness of Jews from the earliest times, spoke of King David's desire to house the **tabernacle of the Testimony** in a building fit for the Lord, even though Isaiah declared that God cannot be confined within four walls and that, magnificent though it had been, the temple was still unworthy of God.

He continued by declaring that his accusers were spiritually blind to God's plan of salvation and had continually resisted the working of the Holy Spirit. They had

compounded their sins by persecuting the prophets who had prepared the way for the Messiah and, worst of all, had betrayed and murdered him, despite the Scriptures which they still disobeyed. However, it was when he shared his **revelation of the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God** that the Jews lost self-control, for the vision stated that Jesus had been raised and exalted which meant they were guilty and the Law had been superseded. They could not accept Stephen's assertions, so they drove him outside the city, where they stoned him to death. Notice that Stephen did not seek his own death; rather he died at the hands of those who would not share his beliefs. **Like Jesus, Stephen commended his Spirit to the Lord and pleaded that his killers might be forgiven.** I wonder whether or not the manner of the saint's death began Saul's spiritual journey from being a Pharisee of Pharisees to becoming the leading Christian evangelist of his age, even though Luke said that he approved of Stephen's death.

Luke's account is a model of what real martyrdom is about: namely accepting the consequences of witnessing to the glory of God, not wreaking havoc and death in his name, but standing up for truth. What Jesus wants from his followers – then and now – is wholehearted commitment. Kingdom work is not to be frustrated by opponents, for making the world a better place is Christ's priority. When he said, **'Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,'** Jesus really meant anyone who will not commit himself or herself wholeheartedly, has no part in his mission. Here's a story of how a Roman Catholic priest gave up his life to witness to the Lord's sacrificial love.

Fr. Maximillian Kolbe was serving in Poland when it was invaded and conquered by Nazi Germany in 1939. When Nazis began to round up Jews to send them to concentration camps, Fr. Maximillian tried to shelter as many as he could. Inevitably, he was betrayed, arrested, then sent to the fearsome Auschwitz Concentration Camp.

Father Maximillian was not cowed by his experiences. Instead, he set about tending the sick, taking communion services, comforting the dying of all creeds and even sharing the small allowance of food he received with the starving. Above all else, he remained a cheerful presence, showing that God's love reached even into the most hellish of places and to those who might have thought themselves abandoned and forgotten. Some of the concentration camp guards were amazed at his smiling face and grace, but his greatest challenge occurred in July 1941, when three prisoners escaped from Auschwitz.

As a result, the Nazi guards lined up the male prisoners and selected ten to be starved to death in an underground bunker. One of those selected to die, Franciszek Gajowniczek, cried out in despair, 'Oh, my poor wife! My poor children! I shall never see them again!' At once, prisoner 16670, Maximillian Kolbe stepped forward from the ranks of prisoners and offered himself in his place. The guards wanted ten victims, so it was of no consequence who was taken into the death bunker and they agreed to the swap. The ten were led to the bunker and sealed inside with no food, water, nor light. A fortnight later, Nazi guards opened the bunker, and were amazed to find Fr. Kolbe still alive, though unable to stand, or speak. Rather than spare him, they gave him a lethal injection of carbolic acid. Even then, he offered no resistance and smiled at them as they finished him off. Franciszek Gajowniczek died peacefully in 1999, an old man saved by an incredible priest. Pope John Paul II recognised his fellow-countryman, Maximillian Kolbe and fast-tracked him towards sainthood, by Beatifying him.

We may never be called to prove our commitment to Jesus in such a drastic way, but we are challenged to trust the Lord enough to serve him wholeheartedly by caring for one another, witnessing to the love and glory of God in Christ Jesus, whatever the cost. When we consider the ill-treatment of early Methodists, including both John and Charles Wesley, who were not immune to the delight of mobs in **'rolling itinerant preachers in the mud'**, we might consider ourselves fortunate. Our increasingly secular society is more likely to display indifference, or mockery, rather than violent hostility to our professions of faith.

Let me assure you that suicide-bombers and their ilk will fail in their mission to undermine our society, for Christ did not break Satan's power by violent hatred, but by self-giving love. We, too, ought to stand firm against those who seek us ill and remain committed witnesses of the Gospel message, in both words and deeds, not allowing fear and hatred to deny justice and care even for those who hate us. **Let us live faithfully and prayerfully, seeking to build God's kingdom on foundations of love. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Sydney Carter for the School of Southwark Cathedral in 1971. It was intended to be chanted unaccompanied, except by a tabor, and the simple melody was named after the Cathedral's Provost, Revd. Ernest Southcott, but has been misspelt in hymnals as 'Southcote'. 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 forevermore. Amen.