

A service for 7th May, 2023 Easter 5

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 by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody, like many of their hymns. We sing the first three verses of hymn number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

1. Jesus calls us here to meet him

As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.

Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.

2. Jesus calls us to confess him

Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall,
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.

3. Jesus calls us to each other,

Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.

Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.

John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (1958 – 2019)

Let us pray.

God our Redeemer, you are the source and sustainer of life throughout the universe, so we have come to worship you with awe and wonder as we remember and celebrate the resurrection of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who triumphed over sin and death for our sakes. For love of sinners like us, Jesus came into the world to share our lives and to bring Good News in both words and deeds. He also came as the Paschal Lamb to atone for the sins of the world at Calvary. By means of his resurrection, Jesus offers us eternal life through his grace alone, by faith in him, not by anything we can do, nor anything deserve. Amazing God, may your holy Name be praised for evermore. Amen.

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

Loving Lord, thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet that you set us on, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities to enrich our lives as we serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we

thank you for continuing to love us even when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

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 lead Christ-centred lives, rather than self-centred ones. Help us obey 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, without the burden of guilt. May the Holy Spirit enable us to 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. Let us pray

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us this wonderful, fruitful and self-sustaining world and for blessing our lives in so many ways. Help us to share our blessings by serving our neighbours as your earthly hands, doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can for as long as we can. However, sometimes the situations we face are far beyond our powers, but not yours, for nothing is impossible to you. Therefore, when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess such wisdom and power, so they may bring about healing in our broken world.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are troubled and needy. We pray for aid to reach the victims of natural disasters especially populations inundated by recent flooding in Malawi, and including people still inundated in the Sind Valley six months after the flooding, all affected by tornadoes in Mississippi and Central USA, and particularly everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. May other nations will be generous in offering aid, not only to these lands, but to countries afflicted by droughts and famine. May grain and oil from Ukrainian ports continue to be sent to relieve their plight and we ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide such victims with desperately-needed aid.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia, their families, friends and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns for them to you, the Good Shepherd, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them.
Gracious Lord, where it is possible 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 be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Lord, we know that so many countries are riven with conflict. We pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and Jerusalem, asking that a spirit of respect and understanding may grow among all nations and all peoples, so peace and justice may be established and prevail. We pray for the governments of the world's nations, that they may govern justly and with mercy for without justice and compassion there is no real peace. In your loving-kindness remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, that they find justice and healing and can rebuild their lives in hope and security. May peace begin in our hearts, so we may bear a Christian witness and offer peace for hostility and loving-kindness for hatred.

Lord, you provide us with a feast of love that we may share its abundance with our neighbours. Therefore, we pray for this church, churches in our Circuit, neighbouring circuits and, indeed the whole Church of Christ, that 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 lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant 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 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 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) StF version

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

As a former English teacher, I take exception to casual misuse of words, especially when the result is either a dignifying of atrocities, or denigration of something noble. Take for example, the way the Media often reports the killing of a hostage by a criminal gang 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 rage 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 suspect 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. Thus, his assertion that Jesus would radically change the traditions handed down from Moses and would bring down the temple 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 the Lord.

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 divine manner in which they had received Torah, 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: of 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 nun in the Eastern Orthodox Church lived out what Jesus said.

Elizabeth Pilenko was born to a rich family in Nineteenth Century Russia, but from childhood her sympathies lay with the peasants, thousands of whom died of starvation every year, even though the Tsar was the richest ruler on earth. She supported the Russian Revolution, but when the Soviet system proved to be as corrupt and cruel as Tsarist times, she became disillusioned, so she emigrated to Paris in 1923, joining a sisterhood of nuns who worked in the poorest districts of the capital. She visited the sick and elderly, prepared meals, besides doing household chores that her patients could not perform themselves, always with a cheerfulness and purpose that endeared her to everybody she met.

Eventually, she was given the title, '**Mother Maria**' when she founded a hospice in Paris. Soon afterwards, in May 1940, the German army occupied France. At once, the Gestapo and SS set about rounding up Jews, sending them to concentration camps. Mother Maria and her chaplain, Father Dmitri Klepinin, responded by sheltering Jews in her hospital, before they were taken to safety by the Resistance. Inevitably, she and Father Dmitri were betrayed, arrested and Maria was sent to **Ravensbruck**, where a mass – extermination plan had been put into effect. In the camp, Maria continued to care for the sick and dying, even sharing the little food she had with others. Soon, she became a living skeleton, yet she remained so cheerful that even the guards called her, 'that wonderful Russian nun'.

On Holy Saturday, 31st March 1945, Maria saw that a group of Jewish women were assembled outside the gas-chamber, which they had been told was a shower room. However, a young girl, realising its true purpose, began to scream in terror. Before the guards could club the child to death, Mother Maria, ran forward, took her hand and uttered, "**Don't be frightened, I'll come with you.**" Praying quietly, the pair shuffled forward to their deaths.

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 Canon Edward Burns in 1968, as his response to the diocese of Blackburn's 'Call to Mission' challenge to write a suitable hymn for its call – and what a response it is! It is a call to share the Good News – a battle cry in an increasingly secular society! Remember, we certainly do have a gospel to proclaim. Hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim.'

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

© Edward J. Burns (1938 –)

Coronation Prayer

Almighty God, we ask a blessing upon King Charles III, our nation and Commonwealth. May the King reign with the steadfastness and wisdom of our late Queen Elizabeth II and may he remain constant in a turbulent, ever-changing world. May we grow and prosper during his reign and may peace prevail in Jesus' name. Amen.

**God save our gracious King,
Long live our noble King,
God save the King!
Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious,
Long to reign over us,
God save the King!**

Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.