

A service for 8th March, 2026 Lent 3 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 95 verses 6 and 7

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care. Amen.

Our opening hymn is a version of the 23rd Psalm, which was written and composed by Stuart Townend in 1996. This is how it happened in his own words: ‘I was actually working on a different song at the time, which after several hours’ hard work was not going well... I happened to flick to this psalm in my Bible while taking a break, a simple melody popped into my head, and the whole thing was written in ten minutes (something I wish as a writer would happen more often to me!). Hymn number 481. ‘The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want;’

1. The Lord’s my Shepherd, I’ll not want;

He makes me lie in pastures green,

He leads me by the still, still waters,

His goodness restores my soul. Chorus

And I will trust in you alone,

And I will trust in you alone,

For your endless mercy follows me,

Your goodness will lead me home.

2. He guides my ways in righteousness,

And he anoints my head with oil;

And my cup – it overflows with joy,

I feast on his pure delights. Chorus

3. And though I walk the darkest path –

I will not fear the evil one,

For you are with me, and your rod and staff

Are the comfort I need to know. Chorus

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

Let us pray

Almighty God, you are the Author of Existence, the Creator of our universe and all who live in it. In your limitless power and wisdom you formed myriad galaxies of stars, planets and moons. You created a beautiful, self-sustaining planet for us to live on and produced a wide variety of plant and animal life fill us with wonder. It is amazing that you care for frail, flawed human beings, yet you do so with a redemptive love which we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. Lord, we come to offer you our adoration and praise, so we ask you to take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate your holiness, goodness and glory. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we come offer our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you day by day, for continuing to love us even when we are selfish, loveless and disobedient, but most of all for the amazing gift of your Son, Jesus, who not only showed us how you want us to live, but became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. As we journey through Lent may we humbly remember how Christ Jesus faced rejection, betrayal and death upon the cross, for our sakes, because only through his crucifixion and resurrection could he break the power of sin and death.

Amazing God, you did all this for sinners like us and yet as we reflect upon your holiness, we know that, despite our efforts to live as you desire, we still fall short of what

we ought to be. Merciful Lord forgive us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves, when our discipleship is half-hearted and we fail to respond to your call. Help us to change our ways and, as we do so, forgive us in Jesus' holy name.

Gracious God, we believe you hear and answer our prayers and have thrown wide your arms with forgiveness. May we respond to your generous love by serving you and our neighbours with warm and caring hearts, so we may glorify you in the name of our Saviour and friend, Jesus Christ. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus 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.

Thomas Colvin, who trained as a missionary at Handsworth Theological College, wrote our next hymn during a day training course for evangelists at Chereponi, Ghana in the mid-1960s. He set his words to a Ghanaian love song. Hymn number 249, 'Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,'

Jesu, Jesu

Fill us with your love,

Show us how to serve

The neighbours we have from you.

1. Kneels at the feet of his friends,

Silently washes their feet,

Master who acts as a slave to them: *Chorus*

2. Neighbours are rich folk and poor,

Neighbours are black folk and white,

Neighbours are nearby and far away: *Chorus*

3. These are the ones we should serve,

These are the ones we should love.

All these are neighbours to us and you: *Chorus*

4. Kneel at the feet of our friends,

Silently washing their feet,

This is the way we should live with you: *Chorus*

© T.S. Colvin {born 1925}

In our prayers of intercession we offer God our concerns for people near and far. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for this beautiful but broken world in which we live. You have created a beautiful, self-sustaining world in which all people should thrive; you have blessed us not only with intelligence but a sense of right and wrong, yet we are confronted by the brokenness and suffering on our planet, often caused by human pride, greed, selfishness, cruelty, foolishness and indifference. We turn to you, asking you to bring healing and wholeness to those who are suffering, for although so many situations lie beyond our power, to you all things are possible. Nevertheless, help us to play what part in making the world a better place.

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

Lord of Shalom, Prince of Peace, once more we hear about new conflicts beginning, this time between the USA, Israel and Iran, besides border disputes between

Pakistan and Afghanistan. We pray for peace in the world, for an end to conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Guide those who have power and influence and for all national leaders to strive for peace by negotiating end to disputes, rather than striking out in anger. Remember in your mercy the victims of warfare, oppression, prejudice and terrorism, bring an end to their suffering and help them to rebuild their lives in security and peace.

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

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the poor and powerless here and abroad, and for all who are working for social justice and peace. We pray that relief agencies and charities will receive the resources and support they need to succeed in their missions. Heavenly Father, help us play what part we can to build a society where we stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we desire justice for all-comers and always seek the common good; a world where we are willing to work together in mutual trust and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

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

Lord of healing and wellbeing, remember people who are suffering from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they are given, but by experiencing your comfort in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are lonely, overworked, anxious or who feel unloved, besides everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence we shall bring our concerns to you for people for whom we are especially concerned.

Help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy wherever we can, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love and grant them peace.

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

Holy God, we pray for your Church throughout the world. Bless and unite us in Spirit and truth, so our words and actions bear ample witness to the Good News that Jesus brought to the world. As we journey through Lent, help us all to seek and discern what you call us to do and grant us faith to answer your call.

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

Abba, Heavenly Father, fill the heart of everybody who is worshipping here with the love of our Saviour Jesus, so we find challenge, pleasure and fulfilment in our discipleship. Protect us, our families and friends against harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin and grant that our lives reflect the love Jesus shares with us, so we live out the Gospel message and bring you glory in his holy name. Amen.

Our next hymn was much used by Messrs Moody and Sankey. Dwight Moody said that even souls that resisted his eloquent pleas to turn to Jesus were melted by this hymn, the words of which offer hope to the tired, careworn and inwardly empty and the tune of which changes so emotively from minor to major key. It was written by a scholarly Scot, Horatius Bonar, who was appointed Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, the highest position one could attain.

Hymn number 248, 'I heard the voice of Jesus say,'

**1. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,**

So weary, worn and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
And he has made me glad.

2. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one;
Stoop down and drink and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in him.

3. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus and I found
In him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk
Till trav'ling days are done.

© *Horatius Bonar (1808 – 1889)*

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 4 verses 5 to 42

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about the sixth hour. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, "Will you give me a drink?" (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?" (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.)

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

"Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water." He told her,

"Go, call your husband and come back."

"I have no husband," she replied.

Jesus said to her, "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true."

“Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

Jesus declared,

“Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman said,

“I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

Then Jesus declared,

“I who speak to you am he.” Just then his disciples returned and were surprised to find him talking with a woman. But no one asked,

“What do you want?” or “Why are you talking with her?”

Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?” They came out of the town and made their way toward him.

Meanwhile his disciples urged him,

“Rabbi, eat something.” But he said to them,

“I have food to eat that you know nothing about.”

Then his disciples said to each other,

“Could someone have brought him food?”

“My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, ‘Four months more and then the harvest’? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest.

Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. Thus the saying ‘One sows and another reaps’ is true. I sent you to reap what you have not worked for. Others have done the hard work, and you have reaped the benefits of their labour.”

Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I ever did.” So when the Samaritans came to him, they urged him to stay with them, and he stayed two days. And because of his words many more became believers. They said to the woman,

“We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Saviour of the world.” Amen.

We continue our worship with Sydney Carter’s, ‘When I needed a neighbour, were you there?’ which he wrote in 1965 and became popular in folk-song circles. You may not know that, during the 1950s and 60s, Sydney worked as a lyricist for Donald Swann in the famous revues of Flanders and Swann. He also wrote a successful song for Sheila Hancock called, ‘My last cigarette’! We shall sing, hymn number 256, ‘When I needed a neighbour, were you there?’

1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? Chorus:

And the creed and the colour and the name won’t matter,

Were you there?

2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? *Chorus:*

3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there? *Chorus:*

4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there? *Chorus:*

5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there? *Chorus:*

6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, *Chorus:*

And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,

I'll be there.

© Sydney Carter {1915 – 2004}

Sermon: “...whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.” John 4:14

Water covers two-thirds of our planet and it was vital not only for life, but for the development of Western culture. After all, it was the fertile, well-watered fields around the Nile Delta, that gave birth to Egyptian civilisation, six thousand years ago, by allowing the Egyptians to farm the land and set up cities. Moreover, whilst we can survive for weeks without food, we will die within days if we take in no fluids. Sadly, the conflicts in the Holy Land for the past five thousand years has largely been about who controls the fertile land and water supplies, so we see how precious water is there.

The gospel story shows that Jesus was willing to break Hebrew social customs and taboos in order to offer salvation to a despised Samaritan woman. When he sat at Jacob's Well in the Samaritan town of Sychar, in the middle of the day, Jesus was ignoring Hebrew customs, for most Jews would have gone around Samaria, rather than travel through it, as there was real hostility between the nations. Nearly five and a half centuries earlier, King Cyrus allowed Jews to return from Exile in Babylon to Judah. They found that Samaritans, Jews from the Northern Kingdom who had previously intermarried with Assyrians and other idol-worshippers, had settled on their land and were outraged when they offered to help rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

When the Jews rejected the offer on the grounds that Samaritans were guilty of apostasy, no longer fit to consider themselves God's people, the Samaritans tried to obstruct them and so began a longstanding feud. This enmity became so bitter that Jews would cross the road to avoid a Samaritan; they would utter a curse and spit upon the ground, if they had to say 'Samaritan' and would sometimes seek out a priest for ritual cleansing if a Samaritan's shadow fell across them. Equally, Samaritans would sometimes follow a Jew, put bits of straw in their tracks and set it on fire, to symbolise 'Good riddance'! Such hatred, though very petty was deeply-rooted.

At midday when a Samaritan woman approached Jacob's Well, Jesus broke two more taboos: not only did he speak to a strange woman, which was considered improper, but he asked her for a drink of water, which meant he would have used her drinking utensil – deemed unclean by a high-minded Jew. It is not surprising that the woman was both surprised and defensive: **'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?'** She would have had another reason to be on her guard, for most women would draw water early in the morning, when it was cool, rather than at the hottest part of the day. It was evident the Samaritan woman was an outcast in her own community, for she had been married five times (whereas rabbinic law frowned upon more than three) and she was co-habiting with a sixth man. She would not have been

allowed to mix with respectable villagers which is why she'd made her lonely way to the well at noon, when all the others had left.

Jesus replied that, if she knew his identity, she would have living water that satisfies completely, unlike the water that slakes our thirst. Although the woman misunderstood Christ at first, she quickly realised that he meant that she could be filled with the water of life, the Holy Spirit, but there was an impediment; she first needed to confront her past and repent. Jesus gently, but candidly exposed her marital situation, which she acknowledged in amazement. She recognised that he was a prophet, but raised a bone of contention between Jews and Samaritans, for the latter worshipped on **Mount Gerizim** whilst Jews worshipped at the **temple in Jerusalem**. Jesus replied that the Holy Spirit would render the argument about the right place for worship obsolete, for true believers will worship in spirit and truth, irrespective of where they are.

As a result, the woman forgot that she was an outcast and ran to her neighbours, saying, **"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done!"** In turn, the Samaritans invited Jesus to spend two days with them and many turned to him, not only because of the woman's testimony, but because of what they heard Jesus say. Our reading ended with the woman restored within her community and the delicious irony that, whereas the Jewish establishment rejected Jesus, the despised Samaritans were able to say, **"It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world."**

Today's readings are a real challenge for us, because we live in a society where social divisions are profound, especially where the war in Gaza is concerned, where the numbers of migrants coming to the United Kingdom on inflatable boats and where many people are more concerned about their material needs than spiritual ones. It is easier to demonize people whose opinions differ markedly from ours than to discuss our differences with them, as our Lord did with the Samaritan woman. Rather than waving flags and using megaphone diplomacy, we need to hold polite conversations, so we may understand the other person's viewpoint. With regard to our material wishes, few people seem to consider thanking God for their blessings, yet we frequently hear them condemning him when things go wrong; **'If God existed, that wouldn't have happened!'** We ought to open their eyes, show what God is doing for them and offer an opportunity for them to talk about their grief and frustration. In my experience, **positive listening** and a shared problem can point to a way forward, even if you don't have an answer to their situation. As Twenty-First Century disciples, do we offer others **'living water'**, not simply by talking to them, but by how we show our faith in our actions and care?

How inclusive are we as individuals or as a church? Are we content with the status quo, or are we trying to work alongside other denominations – even with other faith groups – to work for and benefit our community? Do we recognise people who are isolated within our area through their circumstances, age, race, faith, gender or disability and, if so, are we doing anything about it? One of John Wesley's **'Four alls'** is **'ALL may be saved'** – not a small elite, a chosen few. I believe that: do you? Jesus declared that the fields were ripe for the harvest: I believe they still are, if we have faith enough to join the great work. Let us use Lent to listen to Christ's call and then respond in Spirit, love and faith. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Marjorie Dobson, a Methodist local preacher, who came from Country Durham. She was born in 1940 and became a local preacher when she was twenty. Reflect on her words and consider how we can

serve Jesus as he calls us to – possibly in new ways. Hymn number 664, ‘Lord, you call us to your service’. Hopefully, it will be sung to ‘Angel Voices’.

1. Lord, you call us to your service,
Each in our own way.
Some to loving, caring, healing;
Some to preach, or pray;
Some to work with quiet learning,
Truth discerning,
Day by day.

2. Life for us is always changing
In the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
To the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
As you need us,
Anywhere.

3. Seeing life from your perspective
Makes your challenge plain,
As your heart is grieving over
Those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
You may fashion
Hope again.

4. Lord, we set our human limits
On the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
Pour your power through,
That we may be free in living
And in giving
All for you.

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all forevermore. Amen.