

A service for 9th July, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 145 verses 8 to 14

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that everybody may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.

The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving towards all he has made. The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Graham Kendrick in 1977 and invites Jesus to our worship. We shall sing the first two verses of hymn number 30, 'Jesus, stand among us'.

1. Jesus stand among us

At the meeting of our lives;

Be our sweet agreement

At the meeting of our eyes.

O Jesus, we love You, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

2. So to You we're gathering

Out of each and every land;

Christ the love between us

At the joining of our hands.

O Jesus, we love You, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

© Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, Word of life throughout the universe, you first revealed yourself to human beings through Law you gave Moses and by the prophets, so we might know, love and serve you, but when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you displayed amazing grace and goodness by taking human form as Jesus Christ and living with us. Jesus not only brought Good News in words and deeds of love which reveal your true nature, but gave his life at Calvary to pay the cost of the sins of the world. Through his resurrection, he broke the power of sin and death and by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit he lives within each of us, encouraging, guiding and empowering us as we seek to serve him.

Thank you, O Lord, for all the good things that we enjoy, for the wide variety of gifts you offer us: for everyone who has brought inspiration, love and joy into our lives and for loving us even when we are unloving, faithless and unlovable.

Merciful God, we confess that sometimes we do not appreciate all the blessings you grant us. Sometimes we spurn your gifts because they require us to use them for the well-being of other people, rather than our own prestige or benefit. At other times we abuse your gifts, or simply ignore them because of our laziness, fear, or sense of unworthiness. Often, we let you down because we try to act in our own strength, rather than calling on the Holy Spirit to empower, guide and encourage us. O Lord, in Jesus' lovely name help us amend

our ways and pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers, so we are confident that you have forgiven us and call us to serve you. From now on, let the Holy Spirit rule our words and deeds, so we live as you desire us to and use our gifts of the Spirit for the good of the Church and our neighbours, 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.

Sydney Carter was born in London during the First World War and studied at Oxford University where he took great interest in poetry and music. He was a convinced pacifist and was intrigued by the Shaker movement, founded by Quakers in 1774 in Eighteenth Century America. This hymn, "Lord of the Dance" is, in fact, set to a Shaker's hymn melody, "Simple gifts" by Joseph Brackett and it tells a version of Jesus' life through the medium of dance. Hymn number 247, 'Lord of the dance'

**1. I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun;
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth –**

At Bethlehem I had my birth. *Chorus:*

'Dance, then, wherever you may be;

I am the Lord of the Dance,' said he.

'And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,

And I'll lead you all in the dance,' said he.

**2. I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me.**

I danced for the fishermen, for James and John –

They came with me and the dance went on. *Chorus:*

3. I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame;

The holy people said it was a shame.

They whipped and they stripped and they hung me on high,

And they left me there on a cross to die. *Chorus:*

4. I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black –

It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.

They buried my body and they thought I'd gone,

But I am the dance and I still go on. *Chorus:*

5. They cut me down and I leapt up high;

I am the life that'll never, never die:

I'll live in you if you'll live in me –

'I am the Lord of the Dance,' said he. *Chorus:*

© Sydney Carter {1915 – 2004}

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns to the Lord for people nearby and far afield.

Creator God, we praise and thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining world, but we are only too well aware of its brokenness, some of which is caused by natural disasters, but much of which is the result of mankind's failure to recognize and honour kingdom values such as justice and loving-kindness. Lord, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can to help our neighbours, nearby and far from us. Where the best we can offer in our service is inadequate, then we ask you to warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the countries afflicted by droughts and famine, especially Sudan and Afghanistan where civil war and disputes with the United Nations are making it even more difficult to feed the starving masses. May your loving-kindness break down stubborn pride and warm cold hearts to offer hope to these lands and may grain and oil still be allowed to be carried from Ukrainian ports to ease their plight.

Lord of compassion, 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 the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can, or Christian Aid as they support victims of disasters.

Gracious God, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that justice prevails and people desire fairness for all-comers. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we 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.

We pray for the establishment of peace in the many lands blighted by conflict around the world, including Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace among Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. May our daily lives reflect the peace we ask for the world in the way we care for our neighbours.

Lord of wholeness and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: for all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. Lord, remember neighbours who are lonely, anxious, overworked, or who feel undervalued and unloved as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of 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 as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and peace.

Holy God, grant that this church and churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we represent the glory of shalom, offering harmony, wellbeing, prosperity, security, reconciliation, love and the kind of peace which passes understanding, offering your full blessing to all-comers. May we bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus' name.

Abba, heavenly Father, look upon us, our friends and families with loving-kindness. In the power of the Holy Spirit, keep us safe, help us resist the temptation to sin, and, most of all help us to live out the gospel message in all that we do and say, so our lives honour your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is St. Matthew chapter 11 vs. 16 to 19 & 25 to 30

Jesus said,

"To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners".' But wisdom is proved right by her actions."

At that time Jesus said,

"I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No-one knows the Son except the Father, and no-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Amen.

We continue with a hymn written by Horatius Bonar, who was born in Edinburgh in 1808 and ultimately became Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, the highest position one could attain. We shall sing 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}

Sermon: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Matthew 11:30

In the reading from Matthew, Jesus upbraided the Jewish religious establishment for its blind refusal to accept either his teaching, or that of John the Baptist. He compared the Baptist's aesthetic call to repentance with children playing funerals and his own Good News with other children playing at weddings. The Pharisees were like awkward children who would neither mourn, nor celebrate: they rejected John as demon-possessed because of his austere lifestyle as much as his message, whilst they condemned Jesus as a glutton, a drunkard and an associate of the dregs of society, because he sought out sinners more than the self-righteous. He observed that the religious scholars were too proud to accept the Good News, which Jesus brought, but, instead the humble poor were open to God's salvation. He also warned that he is the One through whom we may come to know God the Father.

Therefore, he called on the humble poor, burdened by Pharisaic demands of 613 rules for righteous living, to turn to him, for he, too, was **'gentle and humble in heart'** and in him they **'would find rest for their souls. For his yoke is easy and his burden is light.'** Jesus was not saying that the Law of Moses should be rejected, but the petty man-made rules that had been derived from them had become an intolerable burden to ordinary people and they often made life miserable, whereas Jesus was offering life lived to the full. Paul understood what Jesus meant, for he wrote this to the Romans: **'Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for those who love their fellowman have fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law.'**

Discipleship does mean accepting the yoke offered by Jesus, but instead of trying to observe hundreds of rules, Jesus has gone to the heart of what God wants. When he was asked what the Greatest Commandment was, our Lord replied, **"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'** The second is this: **'Love your neighbour as yourself.'** There is no commandment greater than these." You can see that, for a Jew in Jesus' time wholehearted love of God was inextricably linked to loving your neighbour as yourself: the same rule applies today.

My wife, Carol, is one of the group of women who expected to receive their pension when they were sixty, but have seen the age rise to sixty-seven, simply because they straddle the cut-off point. Thus, Carol's sister was eligible at sixty-one, but Carol wasn't. Consequently, Carol was not impressed by the Government which brought in the changes

to pensionable age, but she and I supported their policy in 2013 when it committed to spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on international development, provided the aid reached the right people and is not siphoned off by corrupt officials. This promise was enshrined in law, with cross-party support, in 2015. The % target is designed to always be affordable, flexing in response to the changing economic prosperity of the UK. However, in November 2020, the Chancellor announced the Government's intention to temporarily cut this budget to 0.5% of Gross National Income, but the 'temporary cut' looks unlikely to be reversed, so the Methodist Church is currently encouraging us to get in touch our local MPs to ask them to support reversing this cut.

I know that some newspapers and politicians have argued very strongly that, if we are cutting our own budgets, we ought to make similar cuts to foreign aid. However, I am reminded of the opening of "**The Fiddler on the Roof**" when the milkman, **Tevye**, introduced fellow-villagers, one of whom was a beggar. When Tevye declined to give him a coin, saying he'd had a bad week, the beggar quipped, "**You've had a bad week, so I should suffer!**" Our financial woes are serious enough but relative: indeed, what we call poverty in the United Kingdom would be deemed luxury in much of the Developing World, where most of the population try to exist on less than two dollars a day.

Remember that while the Sumatran Tsunami of 2004 claimed the lives of some two hundred thousand people and the Media was obsessed by the disaster, every week two hundred and ten thousand children in the Third World die from poverty – four hundred in the time I have taken for this sermon. **Do we love our neighbours as ourselves?** My friends, it is time to nail our colours to the mast, to work to break the chains of poverty in the Developing World. **As Christ broke the chains of our enslavement to sin, can we – dare we – do less than to fight to break the chains of debt that enslave and degrade our neighbours in the Developing World? Amen.**

Our closing hymn is Sydney Carter's, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?' which he wrote in 1965. 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. 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}

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.