

A service for 10th July, 2022 AfC Sunday (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 68 verses 4 to 6a

Sing to God, sing praise to his name, extol him who rides on the clouds — his name is the LORD— and rejoice before him. A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to guide our discipleship. 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---}

Prayer and Lord's Prayer

God, our heavenly Father, whose Word brought light and life throughout our universe and whose compassion sustains us, we come to you to offer our worship and adoration, for you have revealed your love and grace to sinful humankind through the life, death and resurrection of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. Your wisdom and might are matched only by your boundless love and we freely acknowledge that you have blessed us in so many ways throughout our lives. Today, we celebrate the 159th anniversary of Action for Children which seeks to serve all children in need, whomsoever they may be.

We offer thanks and praise, to you Lord God, for calling us to stand alongside people of other faiths, and people of no faith. Together we celebrate the ways in which

Action for Children seeks justice, hope and wellbeing for all children. We give you thanks that, in changing times, You are our one constant. We offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, for the life of The Reverend Thomas Bowman Stephenson. Inspired by the way he took the time to stop, look and listen to homeless children 150 years ago, we give you thanks that Action for Children has been listening and taking action ever since.

We offer thanks and praise, to you Lord God, for the opportunities to work in partnership with others – connecting listening staff and volunteers to families and communities, support groups, local authorities and health services. We give you thanks that Action for Children's fundraisers, campaigners and skilled specialists enable this work.

With your wondrous love may we stop, look and listen, too. With the compassion of your Son may we wait, see and hear. With the grace of your Holy Spirit may we do what is right, what is needed and what works best for each child and family Action for Children continue to serve. In your glorious name – we shout, 'THANK YOU!' to you, our Lord and God.

AMEN!

Merciful heavenly Father, forgive us for times when our compassion runs dry, or when we see our neighbours in need or in distress, yet do not try to help them, through a sense of inadequacy, fear, selfishness, or an unwillingness to take a chance and get involved. Help us remember how our Saviour Jesus blessed the little children and offered hope and a new beginning to all-comers, then help us change our ways, so we serve as his earthly hands. As Christ encompassed the world's peoples with his love upon the cross, may our arms be opened wide to our neighbours offering practical love in his precious 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.

The author of our next hymn, Revd. Timothy Hughes is a Former director of worship at Holy Trinity Brompton, a large Anglican church in central London, who has since been ordained as a minister in the Church of England and appointed Vicar of St Luke's, Gas Street Birmingham. We shall sing hymn number 175, 'Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,'

1. Light of the world, you stepped down into darkness,

Opened my eyes, let me see

Beauty that made this heart adore you,

Hope of a life spent with you. Chorus:

So here I am to worship,

Here I am to bow down,

Here I am to say that you're my God,

And you're altogether lovely, altogether worthy,

Altogether wonderful to me.

2. King of all days, oh so highly exalted,

Glorious in heaven above.

Humbly you came to the earth you created,

All for love's sake became poor. *Chorus:*

3. And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross.

And I'll never know how much it cost

To see my sin upon that cross..... *Chorus:*

© Tim Hughes

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Gracious God, Father and Mother of all, we thank you for your immense love toward us. We thank you that through our Lord Jesus Christ we are assured that each and every one of us is precious in your sight. You have made us that we all depend and need one another. Help us to respond to your generous love by seeking to serve neighbours who are in need or distress with faithful, cheerful hearts. Empower us with your Spirit, so we can exceed our expectations in our discipleship.

Lord, we pray that you will guide all nations in the ways of justice, liberty and peace: and help them seek the unity and wellbeing of all people, remembering those who have suffered through warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the courage and support to rebuild their broken lives and give to all in authority wisdom to know and strength to do what is right. Remember in your mercy the people of Ukraine as they face invasion by Russia. Bring an end to the fighting, O Lord, and a peace in which Ukraine may remain an independent democracy.

We pray for your church, both locally and throughout the world. Unite us through your Holy Spirit, so we may work together to build a better world and faithfully bear the light of the gospel in all we do and say.

God of grace, comfort those who are sorrowful, troubled and lonely; heal the sick in body, mind and spirit, especially people who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers.....

Grant them all your peace. Grant us compassion for all who suffer and help us provide practical help and friendship to them, so we fulfil the law of Christ Jesus.

We thank you for our families; that we are loved and love. We thank you that you had a special place for children and taught us how to value and respect them. We thank you for the wonderful gift of children; We delight in their thirst for knowledge, their spontaneity, their laughter, their enthusiasm, their natural ability of acceptance. We ask your blessing on Action for Children, those who organize and head the charity, all who work for Action for Children and people who support it through fundraising and prayer. May they enjoy further success in trying to improve children's lives.

We thank you for the gift of childhood, for the joy, wonder and freedom of the young. How blessed we are when this is shared with us. Where there is love in action, there is Christ. We thank you for the rich experiences which come their way as they mature. Help us to be ever ready in our support of them. We thank you for the glimpses of your love we have through them.

Help us to remain children at heart so that we may reflect something of the wonder of discovery in our lives. Help us to retain something of the directness and simplicity of children in our lives so that we may offer hope, joy and love to a hurting world, in Jesus' precious name.

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us our families and friends as we seek to follow you. Guide us throughout our journey of faith, keep us safe in your care and help us to bear the gospel light courageously, so we drive away the darkness in the world. Amen.

"May the Spirit fill our praise, / Guide our thoughts and change our ways: / God in Christ has come to stay; / Live tomorrow's life today." Our next hymn written

by Brian Wren, reminds us that the Holy Spirit is not trapped in ancient history, but is amongst us here now. Hymn number 398, 'There's a Spirit in the air,'

1. There's a spirit in the air,
Telling Christians everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
2. Lose your shyness, find your tongue;
Tell the world what God has done:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
3. When believers break the bread,
When a hungry child is fed,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
4. Still his Spirit leads the fight,
Seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
5. When a stranger's not alone,
Where the homeless find a home,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.
6. May his Spirit fill our praise,
Guide our thoughts and change our ways:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!
7. There's a Spirit in the air,
Calling people everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.

© Brian A. Wren {born 1936}

The first gospel reading Matthew chapter 19 verses 13 to 22

Then little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them. ¹⁴ Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." ¹⁵ When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there.

Now a man came up to Jesus and asked,

"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

"Why do you ask me about what is good?" Jesus replied. "There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments."

"Which ones?" the man enquired. Jesus replied,

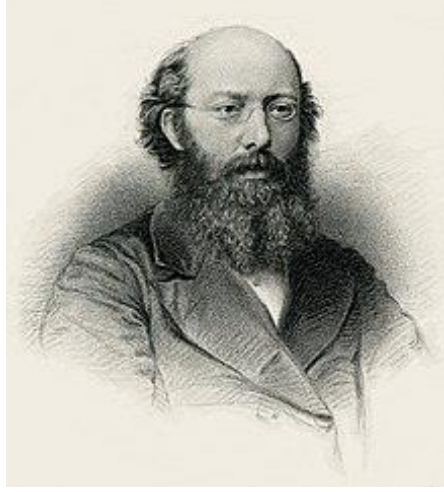
"Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honour your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbour as yourself.' "

"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?"

Jesus answered,

"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Amen.

Two AFC stories (picture)



In September last year, Edd and Stella lost their home in a fire. The family found themselves homeless and struggling to cope. But with support from Action for Children, Edd, Stella and their four children have moved out of temporary accommodation and are beginning to come to terms with their traumatic experience. This is what happened: Edd and Stella's 13-year-old son, Joshua, discovered smoke coming from the family's tumble dryer, so he raised the alarm and rushed out of the house, grabbing his sister, Arielle's, blanket as he went. Instinctively, he knew that she would need it.

The family were told by the fire service there was nothing the family had done to cause the fire, but Edd described the devastation they felt:

"Once you've dealt with the fire, you're then dealing with homelessness... it became like a second trauma. We lost the world at that moment. It's like grieving someone that died. It's not because of the belongings, though, it's the environment."

After the fire, Edd and Stella's three youngest children struggled to sleep. And four-year-old Arielle, who has autism, started harming herself. An Action for Children volunteer met the family, realised they were struggling, so she talked to them about the help available and things started to change for the better. Stella explains: **"She got us sensory lights for Arielle and it was like a switch. Homelessness changed for her that day."**

Edd, who also has autism, found it hard to cope, too, in particular with the number of people asking him about what happened: **"I couldn't deal with people crowding me and, without saying anything, they [Action for Children] knew that. The guys at Action for Children took the brunt of people flooding towards me."** All four children are back at school and are getting the help they need, whilst Stella has also signed up to classes to learn how to manage Arielle's autism. Stella says: **"Action for Children is not like an organisation. They are a personal individual who cares – and they still do. We lost the world at that moment. It's like grieving someone who died."**

Colleen had a tough childhood. Both her parents were addicted to heroin, and life was chaotic. Her mom and sister left when she was young, and Colleen's dad couldn't look after her properly. She says:

"When you're a kid, you look up to your parents, so I thought everything was normal. My memories of that time are still vivid, and I think they'll stay with me for the rest of my life."

I took my first ecstasy tablet at 11 to numb my emotions; it gave me a false kind of confidence. I then started taking anything that was lying around".

Colleen's dad died when she was 16, and she became homeless. Her lowest point came when a violent ex-partner attacked her with a bottle. She said: **"I realised that I didn't want to live the life I was living anymore. We weren't really living, we were just existing. I thought: 'It's time to stand on your own two feet and become you instead of trying to please everyone.'"**

Colleen reported herself homeless and an Action for Children support worker stepped in. We visited Colleen regularly and encouraged her to believe in herself. Her confidence grew, and she got the practical support she needed to find temporary housing. Colleen's life has dramatically changed for the better. She plays football for her favourite team, Celtic, and was selected to represent Scotland at the Homeless World Cup. She is happy, healthy and looking forward to a bright future – with endless possibilities. She says: **"You're labelled as something because of what's happened in your past, whether you have control over it or you don't. But Action for Children helped to turn my life around."**

We continue our worship with a hymn possibly written by Roy Crabtree in 1999.

We shall sing it through twice. Hymn number 242, 'A new commandment'

A new commandment

I give unto you:

That you love one another

As I have loved you,

That you love one another

As I have loved you.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

Anonymous / Ray Crabtree

The second gospel reading Luke chapter 10 verses 25 to 37

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus.

"Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' "

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?"
In reply Jesus said:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and

wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.

The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied,

"The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." Amen.

Sermon (Photograph of Fred and George)



Both gospel readings deal with the Greatest Commandment, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. You may ask, 'What about loving God with all your heart and mind and strength', but Jews at the time of Jesus gave them equal weight of importance: if you love God, you will love your neighbour and vice versa. In the first reading the rich young man lacked the faith to rely on the Lord and not his worldly possessions; materialism held him back. He was unwilling to give what he owned to help the poor and so went away despondent.

The second reading is actually a parable that would have scandalised Jews, for Jews and Samaritans hated one another with even greater passion than Loyalists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, or Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda. Their hatred was so intense that, if a Samaritan's shadow fell upon a Jew, the Jew would consider himself ritually defiled and would seek out a priest to be cleansed. Samaritans were as petty: if a Jew left footprints in the sand, a Samaritan would drop straw into them and set the straw alight as a way of saying '**Good riddance**'!

Imagine, if you will, how a story about Martin McGuinness or Gerry Adams coming to the aid of a robbed and injured Ian Paisley would have gone down in a Loyalist church or club in the 1970s or 1980s. The storyteller would have taken his life in his hands by telling it, yet Jesus' parable about the Good Samaritan would have been as scandalous to his Jewish listeners, because you don't set the enemy as the hero of your story. You may wonder why the priest and lawyer would have left a fellow-Jew in such a state.

Well, the priest may have been going to serve in the temple, so if he was unsure whether or not the traveller was dead, he could not risk touching him, for by touching anything dead the priest would have been made ritually unclean and could not have performed his duties. Ceremony, therefore, took precedence over compassion. Similarly, the lawyer crossed over and passed the injured man, perhaps to avoid becoming unclean, or perhaps through fear of being attacked by the bandits who had waylaid the victim. Only the despised enemy was moved to honour the Greatest Commandment – loving God and neighbour. After he had told the parable, Jesus asked

the lawyer, **“Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”** Notice how the lawyer could not bring himself to use the word **‘Samaritan’** in his answer, **“The one who had mercy on him.”** It speaks through the ages, doesn’t it?

In the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries thousands of abandoned or orphan children lived on the streets and had to beg or steal to survive. Charles Dickens described some of these feral children in “Oliver Twist”, showing how they were regarded as little better than vermin, certainly not beings made in God’s image. However, in March 1869, a Geordie Methodist Minister, Thomas Bowman Stephenson, aged 30, was approached by two Methodist friends, Alfred Mager and Francis Horner, both successful businessmen and Sunday School teachers, who asked for his support to open a model lodging house for down-and-out men in the notorious Mint district of Southwark. Instead, Revd. Stephenson, who had been moved by the plight of abandoned boys as they sheltered underneath railway arches, persuaded them to open a home for homeless boys where they would be cared for and trained for work. Their first home was a renovated stable in Church Street, Waterloo which opened on 9th July, 1869. The first two boys were Fred and George, whose picture is on the screen. In 1871 the home moved to Bonner Road Lambeth and girls were admitted, too. The Wesleyan Methodist Conference supported the work and a number of homes were opened, including one in Ontario, Canada. Homes were divided into small family units run by a ‘house mother’ and a ‘house father’. Training was considered vital and a childcare course was established in 1878. Graduates of the course, known as ‘the Sisterhood’, or ‘the Sisters of the Children’ – were employed in the Homes.

By 1908, the charity was known as ‘National Children’s Home and Orphanage’. The work done by the charity has steadily diversified until, under the new title ‘Action for Children’, it is probably the foremost children and young people’s charity in the UK. AfC helps disadvantaged children in the UK from before they’re born to their twenties, through fostering and adoption; by early intervention to stop abuse and neglect; by helping children with disabilities; by supporting families and children; by speaking out fearlessly for a fair deal for young people and by providing services for young people whose families need support, or who can’t live with their birth families. In other words, it serves those who are the most in need.

Currently Action for Children employs 7000 staff and volunteers, who operate 522 services that improve the lives of 301000 children, teenagers, parents and carers each year. It makes my heart glad to see that the Methodist Church supports the young and vulnerable through AfC, as it supports older, vulnerable people through MHA. This is great work and your support in gifts and prayer is essential, especially as local government grants are having to be cut because of Government funding issues. I’m not overstating the issue: after all the Acorn Hospice in Walsall has had to close through lack of funds. The expert on law asked, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ Everybody is, but particularly those who are vulnerable. Jesus told the lawyer to show loving-kindness, as had the Samaritan. Let us choose to do likewise. Amen.

We conclude our worship with a vision of heaven by a Congregational Minister, Bryn Rees. It has four common settings, which makes it an organist’s nightmare. However, the melody ‘Tetherdown’ was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister. We shall sing hymn number 255, ‘The kingdom of God is justice and joy,’

1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.

2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair.

3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all!

© *Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}*

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 forevermore. Amen.