

## A service for 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2021 (StF)

### Call to Worship: Psalm 103 verses 1 to 4

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. Amen.

*We shall sing the first hymn on our sheets which I wrote three years ago. ‘Christ is here, within this place!’*

**1. Christ is here, within this place!**

**Bringing his redemptive grace.**

**Stop: be still and hear his voice,**

**Bid him welcome and rejoice. Chorus:**

*Light of the world, Redeemer King,*

*All our praise to you we bring.*

**2. Christ is here to tend each soul,**

**Seek us sinners, make us whole.**

**Christ came here to set us free**

**On a cross at Calvary. Chorus:**

**3. Christ is here! He lives again,**

**Shares our joys, our woes, our pain.**

**Christ is here; trust and obey,**

**Serve him now without delay. Chorus:**

**4. Christ is here and he must reign**

**In our hearts, or all’s in vain.**

**Christ is here! Come one, come all,**

**Hear his Word and heed his call. Chorus:**

*M. Rider 5<sup>th</sup> October. 2018 (To ‘Lucerna Laudoniae’ StF 102i)*

*Written after visiting Revd. Peter Knight on 30<sup>th</sup> September. Modified 4<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2021*

### **Let us pray.**

Almighty and Everlasting God, your holy Word created the universe from darkness and chaos; you breathed life into every living being and you sustain your creation by your constant love. Your might and wisdom are as unfathomable as the height, depth and breadth of your love, yet you care for sinful human beings so much you have tried to draw us close to you from our first days. You taught us through the prophets and patriarchs, yet we did not listen and rebelled against you. However, instead of rejecting us, you came to us as Jesus Christ, emptied of his divine powers, except for love.

Jesus lived among us, revealing your nature in words and deeds, then he died at Calvary to atone for the sins of the world. When he was raised, Jesus broke the power of death and offers us new life through faith in him, not by merit, nor by our works, but through his grace. Therefore, Lord, we come to you with joyful hearts, asking you to take away all anxieties that may distract us from our worship. Amen.

### **Let us pray once more.**

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the beauty and fruitfulness of autumn, for all the good things we enjoy; for people who have guided, inspired and loved us, but most of all that you love us despite our manifest failure to live as you call us to.

Merciful Lord, pardon us for failing to love our neighbours as we know we ought, for our words and actions that have hurt others and for times when we have not responded to people in distress, however we may try to excuse our hard-heartedness. Forgive us, too, when we fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly and do not commit ourselves to you and our call. Help us to amend our ways, so that our lives are Christ-centred, not self-centred.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and in boundless grace you have forgiven us. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim and live out Good News in the blessed name of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer Jesus taught his disciples:***

**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.**

*We continue with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care.*

*He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. Hymn number 629, 'God of my faith, I offer you my doubt'.*

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,  
For life at times seems far too dark for me,  
And my belief becomes more insecure,  
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

**2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,  
When I am scared by my anxiety,  
When all I hear is suffering and woe,  
In all my shadows you will walk with me.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,  
When I sink down in sadness or despair,  
When in depression I cannot be touched,  
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

**4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,  
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,  
In aching age or in rejected youth,  
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.**

**5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,  
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,  
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,  
Light in my life and all my life in you.**

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

***We come to our prayers of intercession.***

Lord of all, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us to and to offer healing and hope to our sin-broken world, for we know many people are not as blessed as we are. Therefore, we pray for our neighbours, those near to us or far away: for people who face hardship and suffering, both here and abroad. Grant us the faith

and compassion to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out and offering practical support to neighbours who are in need or distress, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

Lord of all, bring forth leaders who have the wisdom and compassion to care for the well-being of the people they rule over. Teach them to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy are present will real peace prevail. We pray for an end to conflicts that cause not only injury death and destruction, but swell the number of refugees who are seeking to escape from terror and suffering. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare and terrorism across the world, especially at present in Afghanistan. Help us to be your instruments of peace: where there is hatred, let us bring your love; where we have been wronged, let us offer forgiveness; where there is despair, let us offer hope; where there is ignorance, let us offer the light of truth and understanding and where there is prejudice, let us offer loving-kindness in return.

Lord of grace, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all-comers, by striving to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting our differences, rather than being divided by them.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live. God our Saviour, we ask your blessing upon people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they be successful and safe in their endeavours, dear Lord.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued even in the midst of their brokenness. Remember in your mercy our neighbours who are lonely, afraid, unemployed, or overworked, besides all who feel undervalued and unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, in particular people lost during this pandemic. 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, in which there is to be found healing, courage, comfort and peace.

Sovereign God, hear us as we pray for your Church, both here and worldwide: unite us in love and outreach, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

We pray for ourselves: where we are weak in body, give us delight in the strengths we possess; where we have abundant energy, help us use it wisely and well; where we feel downcast and lost, grant us faith to light our way to where we should be. Loving Lord, we don't know what others will ask of us, so we pray for the Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us share your abundant love with all-comers, thereby glorifying your name, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**The Old Testament reading is Job chapter 23 verses 1 to 9 & 16 to 17**

Then Job answered:

“Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling! I would lay my case before him, and fill my mouth with arguments. I would learn what he would answer me, and understand what he would say to me. Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power? No; but he would give heed to me. There an upright person could reason with him, and I should be acquitted forever by my judge.

If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him. God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face! Amen.

*We shall sing the hymn I wrote on my wife's birthday, sixteen years ago, but which I modified last week. 'Lord, when our faith is challenged by life's woes –'*

**1. Lord, when our faith is challenged by life's woes –**

**When evil harms the innocent and just:**

**When we fall foul of Satan's cruellest blows,  
Make yourself known and help us learn to trust.**

**2. Help us to trust you, Lord – and not to blame  
When things we cannot comprehend take place –  
As we think how you took our mortal frame,  
So that, through Jesus, we may see your face.**

**3. When, like poor Job, our lives just fall apart –  
All that we have and love and do is lost –  
Reach out to heal and offer a fresh start:  
Turn our world's Babel into Pentecost!**

**4. For us Christ bore the worst Mankind could do:  
Died to redeem us; rose to bring new life.  
He rose for all, not just a chosen few –  
He stands with us through tragedy and strife.**

**5. Lord, be our guide through frailty, loss and grief,  
When good seems vanquished and our spirits fail;  
Come to our aid and purge our disbelief –  
For, when you're with us, Lord, we shall prevail.**

*M. Rider – 7<sup>th</sup> October, 2006. (Sung to “Ellers” HP 643) mod. 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2021*

**Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 10 verses 17 to 31**

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him,

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.’”

He said to him,

“Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.”

Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said,  
“You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again,  
“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

They were greatly astounded and said to one another,  
“Then who can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said,  
“For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him,  
“Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

Jesus said,  
“Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.” Amen.

**Sermon:** *“O that I knew where I might find him, that I might come even to his dwelling!” Job 23:3*

The Book of Job is one of the treasures of the Bible – and paradoxically, probably one of the least read books, too. It contains the most exquisite imagery and was probably the work of the greatest Jewish rabbis and philosophers hundreds of years before the birth of Christ – commentaries can offer nothing more precise than sometime between the Seventh and Fourth Centuries BC! Job is not a real character; nor is he a Jew. He represents anybody who suffers unjustly, for the book deals with suffering, especially when it happens to a righteous person. Old Testament teaching declared that, if we lead a blameless life, then only good things will happen to us, but if we are rogues all manner of misfortune will befall us. However, by the time this teaching story was written, many people were challenging this teaching, for as Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount, **“the Father in heaven causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”** This raises the awkward question of how a just God can allow, or even ordain suffering.

If you are expecting me to provide all the answers, you will be disappointed, for at the end of the protracted arguments between Job and his friends, Bildad, Eliphaz and Zophar, Job challenged Almighty God to explain why he had lost his wealth, his family and his health, despite leading a pious, blameless life. In reply, God reminded Job of his awesome power and wisdom, through which everything that lives was made, before simply telling Job that, even if he was told why he had been allowed to suffer, he would not be able to comprehend! In other words, the authors of the Book saw no clear way to explain the randomness of pain and misery. All Job could do was to trust God’s goodness, despite evidence that seemed to suggest the opposite.

In today’s reading, Job is seeking God, for he wants an explanation for why he had suffered material and physical loss – if, as his friends contended, his misfortune was the result of his sinning against the Lord. In essence, he wanted to justify himself, to hear Almighty God accept that he had not sinned – that a righteous person could

indeed suffer. Nevertheless, in his anguish, God seems absent, wherever he looks for him and our reading ends with an image of suffering at Calvary: **“God has made my heart faint; the Almighty has terrified me; If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!”** Think of Jesus hanging on the cross and, at the sixth hour, darkness covering the land. Consider, too, our own inner darkness when events make us feel as though God has left us.

As a MHA chaplain, I meet tenants at Bridge Court who are facing severe challenges in health, particularly from arthritis and vascular problems. Most still want to live as independently as possible, but on bad days they can do little and their frustrations boil over and I am frequently asked, “What have I done to deserve this?” Ten months ago, my son-in-law, Graham, died of COVID19, aged thirty-eight. He was an honest, warm-hearted man who had struggled to find work, following a serious car accident. Yet, despite his own problems, he had worked as a volunteer at a job-club, helping jobless people with form-filling and computer skills. I grieve not only for Graham, but for my daughter who has lost the love of her life.

Neither Hannah nor Graham deserved what happened to them, but it is not just individuals who suffer unjustly. Consider the Syrian civilians who have suffered so long under President Assad’s tyranny, or Afghans facing harsh Taliban rule. They are not being punished by God, but are in the wrong place at the wrong time. What of the victims of the severe floods in Germany and Belgium a few weeks ago, or people in La Palma facing a volcanic eruption. These were random events that strip away our sense of invulnerability that our technological advances and our materialism creates. We are not omnipotent, but our obsession with possessions, power and self-sufficiency delude us into believing we are masters or mistresses of the universe.

However, I am convinced that God is not punishing us for our false values by visiting suffering on our neighbours in order to make us turn back to his ways. I could not worship the Lord if he acted in such an arbitrary, merciless way and I suspect you wouldn’t either. God does not need to wreak suffering on others to bring us to our senses. Christ Jesus faced injustice, rejection, torture and death to pay the price of sin as the one perfect sacrifice. His resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit completed the New Covenant, where we are held in such a close relationship with the Lord that we can call him ‘Abba!’, ‘Daddy!’ Jesus taught that materialism won’t save us, but faith will. When our possessions are lost, our faith can carry us forward.

Materialism was the reason the young man in our gospel story was unable to give away his possessions to follow Jesus, even though, like the best of Pharisees, he had kept every commandment and was not only righteous in the eyes of Jews, but earned Jesus’ love. When Christ told him that all he needed to do was to give all he owned to the poor – exchanging earthly riches for treasure in heaven – and follow him, the young man knew that to do so would mean he would no longer be self-sufficient, but would need to trust in God and his fellow human beings and that was a step too far for him.

How often does our society put its trust in technology and material possessions, rather than in God and our neighbours? One of the ironies of the coronavirus pandemic is that, certainly at the onset, many people supported lonely, vulnerable neighbours and there were many random acts of kindness shown – often to strangers, whereas before February 2020, few people even knew the names of their neighbours. If we put more faith in material things than in kingdom values, we pave the way to ruin.

Although we may never be able to fathom why people suffer unjustly – in this life at least – we know that through Christ’s passion and death, God understands and shares our pain. He is not remote, like the Greek gods on Mount Olympus, scoffing at

human failure and pain. Would God, who gave his beloved Son's life to redeem us from the clutches of evil, desert us after all he's done? My friends, following Jesus won't shield us from the random ills of life any more than our possessions, but if we trust in him, we shall be better able to face the blows of misfortune, to support people around us in their distress and bring the gospel light to this sin-darkened world. Amen.

*We close our worship with a hymn written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. As is their usual practice, it is set to a Scots ballad tune, in this case "Kelvingrove". We shall sing number 673, 'Will you come and follow me'.*

**1. Will you come and follow me**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you go where you don't know**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you let my love be shown,**

**Will you let my name be known,**

**Will you let my life be grown**

**In you, and you in me?**

**2. Will you leave yourself behind**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you care for cruel and kind**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you risk the hostile stare**

**Should your life attract or scare,**

**Will you let me answer prayer**

**In you, and you in me?**

**3. Will you let the blinded see**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you set the pris'ners free,**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you kiss the leper clean**

**And do such as this unseen,**

**And admit to what I mean**

**In you, and you in me?**

**4. Will you love the 'you' you hide**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you quell the fear inside,**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you use the faith you've found**

**To reshape the world around**

**Through my sight and touch and sound**

**In you, and you in me?**

**5. Lord, your summons echoes true**

**When you but call my name.**

**Let me turn and follow you,**

**And never be the same.**

**In your company I'll go**

**Where your love and footsteps show.**

**Thus, I'll move and live and grow**

**In you, and you in me.**

*Copyright John Bell & Graham Maule WGRG Iona Community (1987)*

***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.