

A service for 10th September, 2023

Call to worship: Psalm 119 verses 33 to 36

Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at all times. Explain your law to me, and I will obey it; I will keep it with all my heart. Keep me obedient to your commandments, because in them I find happiness. Give me the desire to obey your laws rather than to get rich. Amen.

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

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer. In our prayer of adoration and thanksgiving, when I say 'Almighty God', please respond with 'all glory, honour, power and praise are yours'.

Lord of all, you are the Living Word who spoke our universe into being, who formed this world and the abundant life forms upon it. It is amazing that you, the Source of life and the Wisdom that sustains it, should create mankind and entrusted the stewardship of this world to our care.

Almighty God..... all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.

Faithful God, in your compassion you furnish our daily needs and seek what is best for us. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers

and a conscience to discern between right and wrong, even though you know that we don't always choose wisely.

Almighty God all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.

Gracious God, you know everything about us: our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, our hopes and fears and yet you love us so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, so by his life and teaching, we might understand how you want us live. Through his death and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Almighty God ,,,,,,,,,, all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly children, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled through your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may offer our devotions in spirit and truth. We offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you, but most of all for loving us even when we are loveless and unlovable, when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. In Jesus' holy name, help us to amend our ways, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

Let us say the prayer our Lord 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.

Our second hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year. Hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak. *Chorus:*
*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:***

***Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.***

**3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,**

Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain. *Chorus:*

4. Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams

Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.

Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;

Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:*

5. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame

Until your justice burns brightly again;

Until the nations learn of your ways,

Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus:* © Graham Kendrick (born 1950)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say 'Your kingdom come', please respond with, 'Your will be done'.

Lord of all, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but in circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible. Warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that they govern justly and mercifully for all-comers. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we see others 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.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

God of love, truth and justice, we grieve for countries afflicted by disasters resulting from climate change and for our part in humankind's failure to act as faithful stewards of the earth. The evidence is here before us: droughts and famine; unbearable heatwaves and wildfires; devastating floods, exceptionally powerful storms, depletion of resources and melting ice-caps. In the past months we have seen the devastation and many deaths wrought fires, floods and storms and we fear for future generations. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles, by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather and encouraging our neighbours to do the same.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Lord of shalom, we pray for an end to conflicts throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Grant the victims of warfare, terrorism, prejudice and persecution the safety, support and courage they need to rebuild their broken lives. Bless with success the work of peacemakers and everybody who works with victims of conflict, for they are worthy to be called your children.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

God of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: for neighbours who are lonely, anxious, or who feel 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 to them in compassion

Lord, help us do what we can by offering them practical support as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, for you offer healing, courage, hope, strength and peace.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Holy God, grant that this church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we may bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus’ name.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead good lives but to be bold in sharing your abundant love with both friends and strangers, in Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

The Epistle is Paul’s Letter to the Romans chapter 13 verses 8 to 14

Be under obligation to no one—the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else”—all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, “Love your neighbour as you love yourself.” If you love someone, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law.

You must do this, because you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep. For the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed. The night is nearly over, day is almost here. Let us stop doing the things that belong to the dark, and let us take up weapons for fighting in the light.

Let us conduct ourselves properly, as people who live in the light of day—no orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. But take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 20

“If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.” Amen.

“In blazing light your cross reveals / The truth we dimly knew, / How small the debts men owe to us, / How great our debt to you!” Wonderful words by a retired Leeds schoolteacher, Rosamond Herklots, who began the hymn whilst she was weeding her nephew’s garden. We shall sing hymn number 423, ““Forgive our sins as we forgive,””

**1. ‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’,
You taught us, Lord, to pray,**

But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.

2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?

3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!

4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

Sermon: *“Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law.”* – Rom. 13: 10
How do we show we’re followers of Christ? **Unlike orthodox Jews, we don’t wear a kippah, tallit, or tefillin. Unlike Moslems, we don’t wear a prayer cap and shalwar kameez; unlike Sikhs, we don’t wear a turban, a dagger, a comb, or a ceremonial bracelet.** Some of us may wear a cross necklace, or an ichthus on our lapel, or put a cross, or ichthus on our car, but that can be done by anybody, if they choose. So, how then should people be able to see we’re Christians? **It should not be as much by symbols, but rather how we behave.** Our words and deeds should let the light of Christ’s love shine through them, acting as a pointer to God’s redemptive grace for all. However, Christian history is littered with fractured relationships, hatred, litigation and even the killing of opponents. I was reminded of this, several years ago, when Carol and I visited St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford – a beautiful church in which John Wesley preached. However, it was also the church from which Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley were taken to be burnt at the stake for being Protestants.

Sometimes the Lord must have wondered which side the Church was on!

Even when Matthew was writing his gospel, he clearly felt it necessary to remind his audience about Jesus’ teaching of treatment of fellow Christians who had committed a sin. It is worth noting that in many early manuscripts words, **‘against you’**, is omitted, so it is likely Jesus was offering advice about general, rather than personal, wrongdoing. Whatever the case, the first step was to be a one-to-one discussion, so the wrongdoer wasn’t exposed to public criticism, but had an opportunity to repent privately and rectify matters. Even if an offender rejected this approach, Christians were cautioned to be patient, seeking the support of two friends, or two witnesses, following **Deuteronomic rules (Deut. 19)**, to add weight to the complaint, hoping that when the offender saw it wasn’t just his word against another’s, he’d accept he was in the wrong and repent with as little adverse publicity as possible. Jesus’ principle was of restorative justice, not humiliation and retribution.

Only if the person steadfastly refused to accept his wrongdoing, was he to face the whole Christian community, but if the church agreed that he was at fault and he still remained unrepentant, then he was to be ostracised – with the same hostility Jews felt for pagans and tax-collectors. In other words, the sinner should be given every opportunity to acknowledge his sin and to rectify matters, without his faults being exposed to all and sundry. It is clear that only the most foolish, or hardened offender would reject as many chances and face exclusion from the community. There was no

mention of ASBOs here; offenders were to be given opportunities to quietly put things right and to resume discipleship without being stigmatised. They were to be treated with patient love, not hostility, for Jesus, who pleaded for God to forgive those who were crucifying him, asks us to give offenders opportunities to repent. **That is a real challenge in the light of some awful crimes that we learn of through the Media, for when those involved have received their punishment, how can they be reintegrated into society and become good citizens? Some, like Lucy Letby, may never be released, but lesser offenders will. Yet what is the alternative but to try with those prisoners?**

Paul's letter to the Roman churches was written around AD57, when the number of Gentile Christians there outnumbered their Jewish brothers and sisters. As a result, there was considerable tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians, especially as the former wanted to keep some Hebrew traditions which Gentiles rejected. Paul reminded the Church that although Gentiles outnumbered their Jewish peers, they must respect them, for their heritage – and ours – comes from a Jewish base.

He also told early Christians that they must pay taxes to Caesar, so they weren't seen as subversives. Indeed, Christians were told to fulfil their civil duties and to let the only debt outstanding be, **'the continuing debt to love one another'**. Paul added, **'He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law'**, in other words righteousness is found in love, not in a series of rules, for although the **Torah** directs us to live according to God's will, by Jesus' time Jews had been burdened by **613 rules** derived from the Ten Commandments – rules which were almost impossible for ordinary Jews to honour fully. Paul went to heart of the matter by declaring that all we really need to do to please God is to love our neighbour as oneself, **for if we do, we won't sin against them.**

Some may argue that when he was asked what is the greatest Commandment, Jesus replied, **"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'** This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **'Love your neighbour as yourself.'** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." However, rabbis like Paul's teacher, **Gamaliel, quoted Leviticus**, **'Love your neighbour as yourself,'** taking as spoken that, by so doing, our commitment to and love of God has been honoured, too. Indeed, on one occasion, the great **Rabbi Hillel** was approached by a Gentile who wanted to follow the Jewish faith. The **proselyte** asked Hillel to teach him the Torah as he stood on one leg, so after moment's thought, the rabbi replied, **"Do not do unto a neighbour anything that is hateful to you. The rest is commentary: go and learn it!"**

So, there it is: our path to a right relationship with God is to love other people wholeheartedly. No sacrifices are necessary to earn God's favour; no herculean tasks; no uniform or worn symbol should be needed to mark us out as different, though we may choose to wear one. **Christ Jesus earned our salvation when he became the perfect sacrifice for all sins at Calvary.** Therefore, we should be recognisable as Christians by our words and actions, by our willingness to help the needy, or distressed, here and abroad, by our willingness to forgive those who wrong us – not that this is easy – and by our outreach to strangers as well as our own. If we need an example of how to act, just look at Jesus in the gospels.

Paul ended by calling fellow Christians to put on the armour of light, to be seen for who and what they were in a world of darkness that was about to persecute all who declared that, **'Jesus is Lord'**. Although we're not persecuted for our faith in the United Kingdom, the darkness of sin and despair in an increasingly secular society is only too evident whenever we watch or listen to the news on television or radio. However, the

picture is not hopeless, for occasionally in the news we hear of random acts of kindness and heroism amidst the doom and gloom and as disciples, we have been called to offer love and hope to our communities. Therefore, it is all the more important that we should also put on our armour of light as a defence against a godless existence and as a means of guiding other people by our example. I could have followed this sermon with 'This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine', but I'll refrain! Nevertheless, may our little light shine brightly in Jesus' name. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Jacqueline Jones, a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the United Kingdom for 5 years, but now lives in Christchurch, New Zealand and is enjoying the role of vicar's wife – at least I hope she is! We shall sing hymn number 662, 'Have you heard God's voice: has your heart been stirred?'

1. Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Are you still prepared to follow?

**Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
Though the way be rough and narrow? *Chorus:*
*Will you walk the path that will cost you much
And embrace the pain and sorrow?***

***Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
The disciples of tomorrow?***

**2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
When the multitudes are silent?**

**Will you make a choice to stand your ground
When the crowds are turning violent? *Chorus:***

**3. In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?**

**Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
Will you share your faith with the faithless? *Chorus:***

**4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
And believe it could be different?**

**Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? *Chorus:***

***We will walk the path that will cost us much
And embrace the pain and sorrow.***

***We will trust in One who entrusts to us
The disciples of tomorrow.***

© Jacqueline G. Jones

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.