

## A Service for 11<sup>th</sup> July, 2021

### Call to Worship: Psalm 95 verses 1 to 5

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land. Amen.

*Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn sung to 'Abbots Leigh', but it is set in "Singing the Faith" to Henry Smart's 'Bethany'. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'.*

**1. God is here! As we his people**

**Meet to offer praise and prayer,**

**May we find in fuller measure**

**What it is in Christ we share.**

**Here, as in the world around us,**

**All our varied skills and arts**

**Wait the coming of the Spirit**

**Into open minds and hearts.**

**2. Here are symbols to remind us**

**Of our lifelong need of grace;**

**Here are table, font and pulpit;**

**Here the cross has central place.**

**Here in honesty of preaching,**

**Here in silence, as in speech,**

**Here in newness and renewal,**

**God the Spirit comes to each.**

**3. Here our children find a welcome**

**In the Shepherd's flock and fold:**

**Here as bread and wine are taken,**

**Christ sustains us, as of old.**

**Here the servants of the Servant**

**Seek in worship to explore**

**What it means in daily living**

**To believe and to adore.**

**4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,**

**In an age of change and doubt,**

**Keep us faithful to the gospel,**

**Help us work your purpose out.**

**Here, in this day's dedication,**

**All we have to give, receive:**

**We, who cannot live without you,**

**We adore you! We believe!**

*Let us pray*

Living God, Word of all life throughout the universe, our Sustainer and Saviour, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and always. We are here to offer our best in worship and adoration, for we see in the beauty of our world your wisdom and creative might. We are astonished that you have honoured us by seeking to draw us close to in a relationship when we may call you “Abba”, ‘Father’.

Despite your Law and the efforts of the prophets, we insisted on going our own way, rebelling against you and turning away from you. However, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you took our flesh and lived amongst us as Christ Jesus. He not only showed us how we ought to live, but died like a common criminal at Calvary to redeem the debt of the sins of the whole world. For our sakes, he broke the hold of Satan and, when he was raised from death, he ensured death does not have the final word by offering us everlasting life. That is truly amazing grace, O Lord! Living God, Word of all life throughout the universe, our Sustainer and Saviour, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and always. Amen.

***In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, ‘Merciful Lord’, please respond with, ‘forgive us’.***

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many good things we enjoy; for people who guide, love and inspire us, for many more blessings we receive from you, but most of all for your undying love which we can see in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Jesus. Forgive us when we are unfaithful, self-righteous and judgmental in our dealings with our neighbours.

‘Merciful Lord’ ..... ***‘forgive us’.***

Lord, we acknowledge that we are slow to answer your call to serve in your name, that we are not as generous with our possessions and our time as we ought to be and that our love for you and our neighbours is often lukewarm. Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our failings; restore us to righteousness, and breathe new life into the embers of our faith.

‘Merciful Lord’ ..... ***‘forgive us’.***

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have already pardoned us. Lord God, teach us to share your gift of love with all-comers, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. 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.***

***Our second hymn was written in 1988 by Graham Kendrick at the request of the pro-life charity. The Care Trust. It goes beyond its original remit as it considers many of the evils we encounter and concludes that our corporate and personal failings are cleansed through Jesus. Hymn number 723, ‘Who can sound the depths of sorrow’.***

**1. Who can sound the depths of sorrow  
In the Father heart of God,  
For the children we've rejected,  
For the lives so deeply scarred?  
And each light that we've extinguished  
Has brought darkness to our land:**

Upon our nation, upon our nation,  
Have mercy, Lord.

2. We have scorned the truth you gave us  
We have bowed to other lords.  
We have sacrificed the children  
On the altars of our gods.  
O let truth again shine on us,  
Let your holy fear descend:  
Upon our nation, upon our nation,  
Have mercy, Lord.

3. Who can stand before your anger?  
Who can face your piercing eyes?  
For you love the weak and helpless  
And you hear the victims' cries.  
Yes, you are a God of justice,  
And your judgement surely comes:  
Upon our nation, upon our nation,  
Have mercy, Lord.

4. Who will stand against the violence?  
Who will comfort those who mourn?  
In an age of cruel rejection,  
Who will build for love a home?  
Come and shake us into action,  
Come and melt our hearts of stone:  
Upon your people, upon your people,  
Have mercy, Lord.

5. Who can sound the depths of mercy  
In the Father heart of God?  
For there is a Man of sorrows,  
Who for sinners shed his blood.  
He can heal the wounds of nations,  
He can wash the guilty clean:  
Because of Jesus, because of Jesus,  
Have mercy, Lord.

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***In our prayers of intercession we remember people near and far away.***

Almighty God, we have no doubt that all things are possible for you which is a great comfort to us in our discipleship, for although we strive to meet our neighbours' needs, we are aware how limited our own powers are. Grant us the strength and faith we need to answer Christ's call yet, when the best we can do is not enough, then we pray that you will reach out and move people who can heal some of the world's brokenness to act in our stead.

Holy God, we ask you to revitalise our church and churches world-wide, particularly as we approach the end of restrictions caused by COVID19, so that we may a blessing to our communities and to people further afield. Help us set aside our divisions and differences, so that we speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him as a united body of believers. Bless and use our love, gifts and graces not only to address the needs of our community, but to share Good News and bring others to know, love and serve Christ.

God of peace and harmony, we know of so many parts of the world where wars are being fought, where persecution, sectarianism, prejudice and terrorism blight communities and individuals. As we pray for the victims of man's inhumanity to man, we ask you to guide the leaders of the nations of the world along the paths of mercy and justice from which peace flows like a holy river. Guide us in all our dealings with our neighbours, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world

Loving Lord, we pray for the success of people who are campaigning against pollution and irresponsible consumerism, so this beautiful planet can remain habitable for future generations to enjoy. We include in our prayer people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to less fortunate countries where there are insufficient supplies, for we know we shall not be safe until most people have been vaccinated.

Heavenly Father, we pray for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit and hold before you in particular those whose treatment has been held up because of the pandemic, besides all whose mental and spiritual health have been adversely affected by lockdown restrictions. May they receive treatment that will restore their health, or at least mitigate the results of neglect and delay. Remember people living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Grant them all the support and courage they need to persevere through these testing times.

We offer a prayer for people who are in any kind of need or trouble; everyone who is living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. ....  
Lord, help us to offer them both friendship and practical support, but embrace them with your love, so they may be comforted and find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

We ask your blessing upon everybody who has been working for our wellbeing during this crisis, especially members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers. Bless them, grant them success in their endeavours and keep them safe.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us walk the path of righteousness, sharing the love you give us in such abundance with everybody we meet, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

*We continue our worship with a hymn by Gerald Coates and Noel Richards. It was this darkness that John the Baptist spoke out against, that Jesus brought the light of love to defeat it and which we are charged to continue to bear that light in his name. Hymn number 405, 'Great is the darkness that covers the earth'.*

**1. Great is the darkness that covers the earth,  
Oppression, injustice and pain  
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,  
Though many have come in your name.  
Watching while sanity dies,  
Touched by the madness and lies. *Chorus:*  
*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,  
Pour out your spirit we pray.  
Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,  
Pour out your spirit on us today.***

**2. May now your church rise with power and love,  
This glorious gospel proclaim.  
In every nation salvation will come  
To those who believe in your name.  
Help us bring light to this world  
That we might speed your return. *Chorus:***

**Great celebrations on that final day  
When out of the heavens you come  
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end  
And rulers will bow at your throne.  
Our great commission complete,  
Then face to face we shall meet. *Chorus:***

*Gerald Coates (b. 1944) & Noel Richards (b. 1955)*

**Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 6 verses 14 to 29**

King Herod heard about this, for Jesus' name had become well known. Some were saying,

"John the Baptist has been raised from the dead, and that is why miraculous powers are at work in him."

Others said, "He is Elijah." And still others claimed, "He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of long ago."

But when Herod heard this, he said, "John, the man I beheaded, has been raised from the dead!" For Herod himself had given orders to have John arrested, and he had him bound and put in prison. He did this because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, whom he had married. For John had been saying to Herod,

"It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife."

So Herodias nursed a grudge against John and wanted to kill him. But she was not able to, because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him.

Finally the opportune time came. On his birthday Herod gave a banquet for his high officials and military commanders and the leading men of Galilee. When the daughter of Herodias came in and danced, she pleased Herod and his dinner guests. The king said to the girl,

"Ask me for anything you want, and I'll give it to you." And he promised her with an oath, "Whatever you ask I will give you, up to half my kingdom." She went out and said to her mother,

"What shall I ask for?"

"The head of John the Baptist," she answered.

At once the girl hurried in to the king with the request:

"I want you to give me right now the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

The king was greatly distressed, but because of his oaths and his dinner guests, he did not want to refuse her. So he immediately sent an executioner with orders to bring John's head. The man went, beheaded John in the prison, and brought back his head on a platter. He presented it to the girl, and she gave it to her mother. On hearing of this, John's disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb. Amen.

***Address: Stand up and be counted for the Lord.***

We live in an age when certain elements of the Media delights in exposing the hypocrisy, shortcomings and infidelities of prominent people, so Herod Antipas, Tetrach of Galilee and Peraea was fortunate that he lived long before the age of mass communication, for his deeds would have featured as headline news. After becoming infatuated by Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Philip, Herod had divorced his wife in order to marry Herodias – who was also his niece, so he added incest to his unfaithfulness. It is natural that he did not want his conduct aired in public. However, John the Baptist denounced this sordid saga quite fearlessly in an age when rulers could kill opponents at will. Although he knew the probable consequences, John was not prepared to be a silent witness. Instead, his criticism of King Herod led to his arrest and imprisonment.

Today's reading began with Herod Antipas receiving news of a startling new preacher, who was gaining fame as a healer and miracle worker in the province, Herod's first reaction was to believe it was John the Baptist, raised from the dead, who had been granted miraculous powers. Others, however, said it must be Elijah, the greatest of Israel's prophets, or one of the great prophets, for they saw God's hand in this preacher's works. Herod's belief was unshaken, for he was deeply burdened by guilt at having the Baptist executed, although he knew he had been reluctant for giving the order for John's death. Like his father Herod Antipas was, vain and paranoid, so he almost certainly had spies and informers to warn him of potential threats, but his dealings with John the Baptist has left an indelible legacy of guilt.

What do we know about John the Baptist? Well, his mother, Elizabeth was related to Mary, Jesus' mother. John was the only child of elderly parents. John's father, the priest, Zechariah was told by an angel that John would be great, but also that he must never touch alcohol, nor cut his hair. In other words, John was a Nazirite, one given to God by a sacred vow, either a personal commitment or by a parent's. Nazarites were pledged to live simply and faithfully for as long as the vow lasted. Nazarites were regarded as special by Jews – both Samuel and Sampson are listed in their number. Mark wrote that John the Baptist dressed like Elijah, in a camel hair cloak, with a leather belt: he ate locusts and wild honey, which shows his simple life-style.

It is most likely that John was a member of a priestly sect called the Essenes, who lived at Qumran, by the Dead Sea. They devoted themselves to God in monastic communities. John, however, began to call Jews to repent of their sins and baptised them in the River Jordan to symbolise the washing away of sins and the granting of a fresh start. Today's reading deals with John's death, simply because he would not close his eyes to wrongdoing – even if the sinners in his sights were the rulers of the country, who had the power to order summary executions.

Strangely, Herod seemed to have been attracted by John's straight-talking and would have been content to keep him in prison to stop his public criticism. However, Herodias was not as forgiving, so when her daughter, Salome, delighted Herod and his guests by dancing at a dinner, she saw a chance to avenge herself upon her critic. Herod rashly told Salome that he would give her anything she asked for – up to half his kingdom – and the girl was directed by Herodias to ask for John's head. The king, though appalled and reluctant, could not back down from his pledge without losing face, so he had to give orders for John's immediate execution. Therefore, it is not surprising that, when he heard of Jesus' preaching and healing, he should think John had risen from the dead, but this time he was dealing with God's Son, Jesus, not the messenger and the message Jesus brought is timeless and can neither be denied nor silenced.

Our reading challenges us to stand up for kingdom values and the Good News Jesus brings to the world – not criticising for its own sake but speaking out against things we believe are morally wrong, or cruel, or which deny the love of God to those around us, even if our opposition makes us unpopular with the wrongdoers. In an age when it is unfashionable to do so, we should be willing raise our head above the parapet and expose an evil, or injustice. Consider the courage needed a few years ago by whistleblowers who exposed the abuses at Stafford Hospital and what might have happened had they kept silent. Think of Pastor Martin Niemoller, who defied Hitler's efforts to corrupt the Church in Germany and who spent the Second World War in a concentration camp, or Martin Luther King whose fight for social justice led to his death, or Nelson Mandela, imprisoned for twenty-seven years for his opposition to Apartheid.

Evil will only flourish and grow if good people fail to stand up against it. However, it is important that we do not become the Christian stereotypes who are portrayed in television programmes as sour-faced killjoys, who oppose anything pleasurable, or strident puritans, who take malicious pleasure in denouncing others. Archbishop Desmond Tutu opposed Apartheid just as passionately as Nelson Mandela, but you could rarely meet as friendly and cheerful a Christian as he. Nevertheless, his friendliness did not stop him speaking out openly against injustice, but it may have protected him from wrath of the South African authorities. So, let's remain warm-hearted as we stand up for what we believe is right, for firm yet friendly opposition can change people's minds and, if we don't speak out, who will? Amen.

*We conclude our worship with another hymn by Graham Kendrick, written for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and which 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:***

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***Benediction***

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