

## A service for 11<sup>th</sup> October, 2020 (StF)

### Call to Worship: Psalm 106 verses 1 to 3

Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures for ever. Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the LORD or fully declare his praise? Blessed are they who maintain justice, who constantly do what is right. Amen.

*Our opening hymn reminds us that until the late Seventeenth Century only metrical Psalms were sung in churches. The version of the Twenty-third Psalm which we are going to listen to was written by Stuart Townend in about ten minutes in 1996. At the time he was having difficulty writing another hymn, so he took a short break and idly flipped through his Bible and opened it at the Twenty Third Psalm. The melody came to mind almost at once and the words had been written down soon afterwards. Now that's what I call hymn-writing! Hymn number 481, 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;'*

#### 1. The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;

He makes me lie in pastures green,  
He leads me by the still, still waters,  
His goodness restores my soul. *Chorus*

*And I will trust in you alone,  
And I will trust in you alone,  
For your endless mercy follows me,  
Your goodness will lead me home.*

#### 2. He guides my ways in righteousness,

And he anoints my head with oil;  
And my cup – it overflows with joy,  
I feast on his pure delights. *Chorus*

*And I will trust in you alone,  
And I will trust in you alone,  
For your endless mercy follows me,  
Your goodness will lead me home.*

#### 3. And though I walk the darkest path –

I will not fear the evil one,  
For you art with me, and your rod and staff  
Are the comfort I need to know. *Chorus*

*And I will trust in you alone,  
And I will trust in you alone,  
For your endless mercy follows me,  
Your goodness will lead me home.*

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

### Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Almighty God all glory and praise are yours forever.

Lord of all, you are the Living Word who spoke our universe into being, who formed this world and all that lives upon it. It is you who created mankind and entrusted the stewardship of this world to our care.

Faithful God, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and provide our daily needs. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers and a conscience to discern between right and wrong. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

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 crucifixion and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled by your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in love, spirit and truth.

Almighty God all glory and praise are yours forever. Amen.

**In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Gracious God', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.**

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things we enjoy and experiences that have fulfilled us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we should. In Jesus' precious 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.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. May we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for 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 next hymn is from the Iona Community and was co-written by John Bell and Graham Maule. Usually, their hymns are set to Scots folk tunes, but this is set to a French Carol. We shall listen to hymn number 251, 'Jesus, Christ is waiting,'*

**1. Jesus Christ is waiting,  
Waiting in the streets;  
No one is his neighbour,  
All alone he eats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am lonely, too:  
Make me, friend or stranger,  
Fit to wait on you.**

**2. Jesus Christ is raging,  
Raging in the streets,  
Where injustice spirals  
And real hope retreats.**

**Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am angry, too:  
In the kingdom's causes,  
Let me rage with you.**

**3. Jesus Christ is healing,  
Healing in the streets,  
Curing those who suffer,  
Touching those he greets.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I have pity, too:  
Let my care be active,  
Healing, just like you.**

**4. Jesus Christ is dancing,  
Dancing in the streets,  
Where each sign of hatred  
He, with love, defeats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I should triumph, too:  
Where good conquers evil,  
Let me dance with you.**

**5. Jesus Christ is calling,  
Calling in the streets,  
'Who will join my journey?  
I will guide their feet.'  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
Let my fears be few:  
Walk one step before me;  
I will follow you.**

© *John L. Bell (B 1949) & Graham Maule (B 1958)*

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

God most gracious and holy, thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout lockdown and which we are confident will bring us through this time of trial. Help us to reveal the light of your love in our daily lives, so we can lighten some of the darkness that has enveloped the world by caring for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us all the spiritual resources we need to answer your call, but in circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, this church, the other churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Help us as we begin to open our buildings and as we plan for the ending of lockdown, for many churches are facing significant issues that have arisen during the past six months. Nevertheless, help us all to share the Good News, united in words and deeds, so we reveal Christ as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

Lord of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for an end to conflicts, terrorism and persecution around the world. Guide us all in the way of peace.

Lord of shalom, or wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Let them feel your presence in their

need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout the treatment their time of trial. We remember neighbours who are lonely, or troubled, for people who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will reach out to them. .... Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship, although that is difficult at a time of social distancing, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love and comfort.

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for schools and universities as they come to terms difficulties that have arisen since the academic year began. Help those in authority take wise courses of action that help minimise the risk of infection and grant university students the wisdom and patience to bear current restrictions in the hope that they will be able to enjoy normality before long.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe in their duties and help them to successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccines that work. Help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

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 Christ-centred lives but to share the abundance of your love with a broken world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

*Daniel Shutte, a member of the St. Louis Jesuits in the USA, wrote our next hymn in 1981. He is one of only a few modern Catholic hymn-writers whose works have an ecumenical appeal. This hymn uses imagery from the call of Isaiah and has become one of our most popular hymns. Hymn number 663, 'I, the Lord of sea and sky,'*

**1. I, the Lord of sea and sky,  
I have heard my people cry;  
All who dwell in dark and sin  
My hand will save.  
I, who made the stars of night,  
I will make their darkness bright.  
I will speak my word to them.**

**Whom shall I send? *Chorus:***

*Here I am, Lord.*

*Is it I, Lord?*

*I have heard you calling in the night.*

*I will go, Lord,*

*If you lead me;*

*I will hold your people in my heart.*

**2. I, the Lord of snow and rain,  
I have borne my people's pain;  
I have wept for love of them –  
They turn away.  
I will break their hearts of stone,  
Give them hearts for love alone;  
I will speak my word to them.**

**Whom shall I send? *Chorus:***

**3. I, the Lord of wind and flame,  
I will tend the poor and lame,  
I will set a feast for them –  
My hand will save.**

**Finest bread I will provide  
Till their hearts are satisfied;  
I will give my life to them.**

**Whom shall I send? *Chorus:***

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**The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 25 verses 1 to 9**

O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvellous things, things planned long ago. You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.

Therefore, strong peoples will honour you; cities of ruthless nations will revere you. You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat. For the breath of the ruthless is like a storm driving against a wall and like the heat of the desert. You silence the uproar of foreigners; as heat is reduced by the shadow of a cloud, so the song of the ruthless is stilled.

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken.

In that day they will say,  
"Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." Amen.

**Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 22 verses 1 to 14**

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said,

'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.' But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, ill-treated them and killed them.

The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city. Then he said to his servants,

'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'

So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes.

'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless.

Then the king told the attendants,

'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are invited, but few are chosen." Amen.

*"The outcast are welcomed / God's banquet to share, / And hope is awakened / In place of despair." Our next hymn is a vision of God's kingdom from Bryn Rees, a Congregationalist Minister. Hymn number 651, '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}

**Sermon: "The king's wedding banquet" – Matthew 22: 1 – 14**

I used to receive a visit from a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses every month, even though I am certain that they had long given up trying to persuade me to their way of thinking. We often had up to half an hour's discussion on the doorstep on theology, so when my friends arrived five minutes before I was due to eat supper one Friday, my heart sank at the prospect of a spoilt meal. However, the lead witness began by asking, "What does the kingdom of God mean to you?" I replied that the kingdom is where God's sovereignty is undisputed, where justice and mercy prevail and people enjoy the full blessings of shalom: peace; prosperity (not necessarily in material terms); good health; well-being and unity with one another and with God. To my surprise, the witness handed me a tract, smiled and departed. I can only assume that my answer took the wind out of his sails.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus used a banquet motif in his parable – actually there are two joined together. Please don't come to me later and point out inconsistencies in the story. I know that, by the time the king had destroyed the rebellious city and had his servants find new guests, the feast would have been spoilt. Just suspend judgment and consider what Christ was alluding to. Unlike other gospel accounts, Matthew, whose gospel was intended primarily for Jewish Christians, has the king invite the cream of Jewish society to his son's wedding feast – as Jews would think befitting for a king. Those alluded to by Jesus were the Sanhedrin, Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees, the very people who rejected both Jesus and his Good News.

In the parable, the guests treated the invitation with contempt, abused the servants who were sent to escort them to the palace and even killed some. Although it could be argued that the servants represented earlier prophets, it is more likely that

they were intended to be early Christians persecuted by people like Saul before his conversion on the Damascus Road. You may think the king over-reacted by destroying the city, but the behaviour of the rebels would have been seen as a direct challenge to his authority – and in the First Century Middle East, it would not be improbable. Indeed, think of how President Assad has treated his fellow Syrians in the face of their protests, as has President Lukashenko in Belarus – and that is in the Twenty-First Century!

Having dealt with his rebels, the king despatched his servants, saying, **'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.'** In other words, the invitation is opened to all, even to those who are reluctant because they think they are too unworthy. Jesus made it quite clear that salvation would be rejected by the Jewish hierarchy and, instead, would be open to all-comers, the poor, ignorant, to harlots and tax-gathers, the ceremonially unclean and – most importantly – to Gentiles. This wonderful picture of God's kingdom being open to all gives each of us hope, for God embraces the world with his love. He is inclusive, not exclusive.

This is the precept that inspired the Wesleys, George Whitefield and other early Methodists to go into the bleakest, sin-ridden towns and villages in the United Kingdom at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution – places which were shunned by 'respectable' people. John Wesley's article of faith: **'All need to be saved; all may be saved; all may know themselves saved; all may be saved to the uttermost,'** was the driving force of a peaceful revolution that probably saved this country from violent political revolutions that swept Europe in the 1840s. Good News was both preached and sung in a way that let the uneducated understand; classes not only supported people spiritually, but ensured mutual support. As a result, many thousands of people changed their ways, gained self-respect and hope. As long as Methodism remains a social movement as well as a religious group, there is hope, but not if we retreat into the four walls of a church on Sunday mornings. We must let the light of our faith shine through our daily lives.

The second parable has a strange ending: one man is dressed inappropriately and is bound hand and foot, then thrown out. In effect, the man was wearing dirty clothes, a sign of disrespect for the king and was excluded from the kingdom as a result. According to my commentaries, ordinary people did not have special wedding attire, but would at least turn up in clean clothes as a sign of respect for the host. This man's dirty clothes represented his failure to repent, that is, to change his sinful ways, so it is more understandable that he excluded himself by his attitude, rather than being victimised by the king for being poor.

Our readings show God as compassionate, warm-hearted and all-embracing, rather than as the somewhat arbitrary – even vengeful – Lord represented in much of the Old Testament. He is the Good Shepherd, willing to lay down his life for his flock. We are invited to his Son's wedding feast, whosoever and whatsoever we are. Will you accept his gracious invitation, seek to change anything in your lives that you think will grieve the Lord and, instead, feast on his enduring love? Amen.

*We shall close our worship with a hymn by Jacqui Jones, a South African Christian composer and singer, who now lives as a vicar's wife in New Zealand. 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.***

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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 all now and for evermore. Amen.**