

## A service for 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2023. (StF)

### Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 1 to 3

Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. Amen.

*We praise the Lord as we sing a hymn, written in 1966 by Michael Seward, a former canon of St. Paul's Cathedral and church commissioner. This hymn was a favourite of John Runcie, a former Archbishop of Canterbury. We shall sing hymn number 319, Christ triumphant, ever reigning'.*

1. Christ triumphant, ever reigning,  
Saviour, Master, King,  
Lord of heaven, our lives sustaining,

Hear us as we sing: *Chorus*

*Yours the glory and the crown,  
The high renown, the eternal name.*

2. Word incarnate, truth revealing,  
Son of Man on earth!

Power and majesty concealing

By your humble birth: *Chorus*

3. Suffering Servant, scorned, ill-treated,  
Victim crucified!

Death is through the cross defeated,

Sinners justified: *Chorus*

4. Priestly King, enthroned for ever  
High in heaven above!

Sin and death and hell shall never

Stifle hymns of love: *Chorus*

5. So, our hearts and voices raising

Through the ages long,

Ceaselessly upon you gazing,

This shall be our song: *Chorus*

© Michael Seward (1932 – 2015)

### **Let us pray.**

Almighty God, Author of life throughout the universe, your compassion sustains us and you bless humankind with your redemptive love, a love we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. We rejoice that he has broken the power of sin and death and reconciled us to you, our heavenly Father. Jesus offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve, or can do to earn it.

Therefore, Lord, as we come to offer you our praise, adoration and thanksgiving today, take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate your holiness, goodness and glory. Amen.

***We come to the Lord in prayer again. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.***

Loving Lord, accept our praise and thanksgiving for this beautiful planet that you made for us, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities you provide for us to serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for boundless love us even at our worst, when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess our failure to live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and sometimes disregard your call to love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience, we know how deeply we grieve you.

Lord of righteousness, help us turn away from wrongdoing and back to you. Warm and mould our hearts and guide us with your truth, so we lead Christ-centred lives, not self-centred ones. May our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death and allow us to play our part in building your kingdom here.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus as his disciples, without the burden of guilt. May the Holy Spirit enable us to love and serve our neighbours faithfully and joyfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***We shall say the Lord's Prayer***

***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 was written by John Greenleaf Whittier, an American Quaker, whose ancestors had travelled with the Pilgrim Fathers, so he shared their dislike of ceremonies and music in churches. Indeed, he did not acknowledge this hymn, claiming to know nothing about music and to have never written a hymn in all his life! Apart from being a devout Quaker, Mr. Whittier was a Massachusetts farmer's son, but rejected a life working on the land to become editor of a newspaper in Boston. He was an active anti - slavery campaigner and, in time, secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1836. As a result of his opposition, he was often set*

*upon by anti-abolitionist mobs, but he lived to see the end of slavery in the United States. Hymn number 495, "Dear Lord and Father of Mankind".*

1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind,  
Forgive our foolish ways;  
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,  
In purer lives Thy service find,  
In deeper reverence, praise.

2. In simple trust like theirs who heard,  
Beside the Syrian sea,  
The gracious calling of the Lord,  
Let us, like them, without a word,  
Rise up and follow Thee.

3. O Sabbath rest by Galilee!  
O calm of hills above,  
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee  
The silence of eternity,  
Interpreted by love.

4. With that deep hush subduing all  
Our words and works that drown  
The tender whisper of thy call,  
As noiseless let thy blessing fall  
As fell thy manna down.

5. Drop Thy still dews of quietness,  
Till all our strivings cease;  
Take from our souls the strain and stress,  
And let our ordered lives confess  
The beauty of thy peace.

6. Breathe through the heats of our desire,  
Thy coolness and Thy balm;  
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire,  
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,  
O still small voice of calm!

© John Greenleaf Whittier {1807 – 1892}

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

Gracious, heavenly Father, Christ Jesus came as the True Light in the sin-darkened, selfish and broken world, for which we pray now. We recognize how you have blessed us and, in response, we offer ourselves to play what part we can to build your kingdom here by reaching out to neighbours who are in distress or need. However, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, for whom nothing is impossible. Warm and mould the hearts and minds of people who wield power and influence and encourage them to bring about much-needed change.

Lord of all, guide leaders of the wealthy nations to be generous to the people of countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands afflicted by droughts, famine and natural disasters. We thank you for work being done by non-governmental organizations and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide the world's needy with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as inflation increases to record levels and the cost of food and fuel spirals out of control. We ask a blessing on food banks, warm spaces and other initiatives which are helping the poor, but pray that new ways may be found to offer hope and support to people who are facing the awful choice between heating their homes, or of eating properly during the winter.

Heavenly Father, we ask your blessing on the National Health Service at this time of crisis: for patients and the doctors, nurses, paramedics and ancillary workers who care for them. Guide our politicians to provide answers to the many problems that beset the NHS, so it continues to support and heal us when we are sick.

God of wellbeing, we pray for everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit. Bring them renewed strength, healing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need.

We also remember people who have been bereaved, or those who are lonely, or neglected, or who are homeless or unemployed. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us who are in any kind of trouble, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help at this time .....  
Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they receive healing, comfort, hope and peace.

God of shalom, we pray for the victims of war, terrorism, prejudice and oppression. We pray particularly for an end to the war in Ukraine and the heartbreaking suffering of the civil population. Bring an end to their anguish and help them rebuild their lives in peace and security. May the troubles in Jerusalem not result in a major outbreak of conflict between Jews and Palestinians. Remember, too, the people of Memphis as they come to terms with the murder of a motorist by out-of-control policemen. May urgent reforms end abuse of power and brutality. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of local and national leaders, so they turn away from using violence as a means of gaining their own way. Instead, may they govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of true peace. Heavenly Father, we offer our prayer for

victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and persecution. Bring an end to their anguish and help them rebuild their lives in peace and security.

Saviour, we pray for this church and churches in our Circuit, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside and all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission to build your kingdom in spirit, love and truth.

Abba, Father, bless us and our families as we seek to answer our call to serve you. May the joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us to let the light of your love shine through our actions and words, as we share your blessings with everyone we meet and honour you through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

### **Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 5 verses 21 to 37**

“You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.’ But I tell you, do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his



footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one. Amen.

*We shall continue with a hymn written by Rosamond Herklots, a school teacher from Leeds, in June 1966 after she had been weeding her nephew's garden and compared the deep roots of the weeds, obstructing the growth of nearby flowers, with bitter resentment that can hinder Christian growth. 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:** "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago," Matt. 5: 21

Today's reading deals with the way in which the Law of Moses had moved from its original purpose, to instruct the Israelites to live well, to a legalised set of practices that did little to improve society, because it concentrated on the letter of the law, not its spirit. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus told his followers that, '**unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.**' The Pharisees were actually sincere in their efforts to honour God, but their self-righteousness and sense of superiority over those who could not observe every tiny detail of the 613 Rules of Righteousness irritated Jesus, especially as their observance was based on the letter of the law, rather than on practical commonsense and compassion. Over generations, they had woven Torah from a series of rules that made it easier for neighbours to coexist – the Ten Commandments – to traditions rather than laws, which dealt with food hygiene, personal cleanliness and similar matters as well as Sabbath observance. If you've ever wondered why the priest and lawyer passed the injured Jew on the other side of the road in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, it was not so much because they were afraid of being attacked by robbers, but because they were uncertain whether or not the victim was dead, for if anyone touched a corpse, they would become ceremonially unclean, so the priest could not officiate in the

temple, nor the lawyer worship there until they had been formally cleansed according to the law.

In our reading Christ used major laws to illustrate his point. He declared that the Sixth Commandment declared that we shall not kill, for if we do, we face both human and God's judgment. However, Christ added that the anger and contempt that can lead to murder endangers our spirit and must be resisted. He said, **"Anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."** Raca is an Aramaic term of contempt, meaning 'empty-headed', 'vain' or 'worthless', so its target could seek redress in a court of law for defamation of character. Jesus told his listeners that similar contempt would lead to God's judgment – not literally to burning in hell which is a medieval Christian image. The hell Jesus referred to was **Gehenna**, a place outside Jerusalem where its rubbish was burnt throughout the day and night: what he actually meant was those who treated others with contempt risked being cast aside by God like rubbish – excluded from his presence.

Jesus expanded on this point by saying that before we make a sacrifice – or in modern terms, before we ask God's forgiveness – we must seek reconciliation from people with whom we have fallen out, or who we have wronged – **"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us"**! We need to be at peace with ourselves and our neighbours before we can seek reconciliation to God. I remember being in church shortly after Carol and I had exchanged angry words and the theme of the sermon was, **'First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.'** At the time we were sitting about three feet apart on the same pew, but before the sermon was half way through, we had mouthed, **'Sorry!'** to one another and had closed ranks, much to the amusement of the preacher, who told us that his sermon was clearly directed at us!

Next, Christ declared that it is not only the act of marital infidelity that will incur God's judgment, but the lustful thoughts that can lead to such behaviour. Some people worry about this, because this seems to condemn sexual attraction without which human society would have died out long ago. It is better understood when the actual meaning of the Greek word **gyne**, translated as 'woman', refers to a **wife, or married woman**, in which case any liaison would be adulterous, whereas an attraction to an unattached woman is perfectly all right! What Jesus effectively said is that we must not harbour thoughts of illicit relationships, because such ideas can lead to deeds which destroy the sanctity of marriage. Moreover, Jesus did not add that listeners should literally gouge out their eye, or cut off their hand rather than yield to sin, but meant instead we may have to make painful choices, involving severing friendships, or renouncing favourite activities, to set aside any temptation to sin.

The sanctity of marriage is the subject of Christ's next point, for he criticised the contemporary practice that allowed men to divorce their wives – and not the other way round – for the most trivial of reasons, including – amazing as it seems – cooking an unsatisfactory meal, or burning the dinner! Worse still, a husband could simply dismiss his wife without ratifying it in a court. The Commandment in Deuteronomy 24 effectively gave adultery as the only ground for divorce, so Jesus told the crowd that a divorce for any other reason broke his Father's intention for the institution of marriage – that it was to be a life-long commitment, which might only be ended for the most serious of reasons: the

actual breakdown of the relationship. Marriage must never be ended lightly and without legal sanction.

What message does this passage hold for us? It emphasises the importance of human relationships and the law: it places great emphasis on reconciliation and mutual respect, on observing the spirit of the law, rather than labouring on nit-picking points to pervert justice. Christ tells us how important relationships are – in the family, in broader society and with God, for if our dealings with other people are fractured, how can we be at peace with the Lord our God?

We are challenged to seek reconciliation with those with whom we have fallen out, or from whom we are estranged. Christ calls us to value people, even if we find it hard to like them, for he cared for all-comers; so must we. Moreover, he calls us to work our hardest to maintain good family relationships – and, no, that is not always easy, but that is no excuse for not trying. In effect, Jesus challenges us to live with such love and integrity that others can trust in our honesty. **May we meet that challenge. Amen.**

*We conclude our worship with a hymn written in 1974 by Revd. Bryn Rees, a Congregationalist Minister at Tetherdown URC Church in Muswell Hill, London. . One of the set melodies for this hymn was composed by Gerald Barnes the organist at Tetherdown Church. There again, there are another three set melodies. We shall sing 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, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.**