

A service for 13th February, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 34 verses 1 to 3

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody, like many of their hymns. We sing the first three verses of hymn number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

1. Jesus calls us here to meet him

As, through word and song and prayer,

We affirm God's promised presence

Where his people live and care.

Praise the God who keeps his promise;

Praise the Son who calls us friends;

Praise the Spirit who, among us,

To our hopes and fears attends.

2. Jesus calls us to confess him

Word of life and Lord of all,

Sharer of our flesh and frailness,

Saving all who fail or fall,

Tell his holy human story;

Tell his tales that all may hear;

Tell the world that Christ in glory

Came to earth to meet us here.

3, Jesus calls us to each other,

Vastly different though we are;

Creed and colour, class and gender

Neither limit nor debar.

Join the hand of friend and stranger;

Join the hands of age and youth;

Join the faithful and the doubter

In their common search for truth.

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

Let us pray

Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, we have to worship and adore you. Author and Sustainer of all life, we worship and adore you. Saviour of the world, we worship and adore you. You created us in your image, gave us stewardship over the world and have striven to draw us into the closest of relationships with you, where we may call you 'Abba', 'Daddy'. Even when we set ourselves against you and made ourselves your enemy, you persevered and shared our mortal flesh by coming as Jesus Christ.

Jesus grew up among people like us, sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations, yet doing so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. We believe his death and resurrection broke the hold of sin and death over us and we have eternal life through faith in him. Therefore, amazing heavenly Father, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for we offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please reply, 'Hear our prayer'.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your boundless, enduring love that has not only set us on a beautiful, self-sustaining planet, but offers us blessings day-by-day. Thank you for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us, for challenges that shape our character and for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care. Most of all, thank you for loving us at times when we are faithless, loveless and unlovable.

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

Merciful Lord, we ask you to pardon and restore us as we recall times when we have not loved you wholeheartedly, when we have ignored your call to serve you, for our failure to care for our neighbours as we know we ought, especially when they are in distress, or need help. Forgive us, too, when we try to justify our sinfulness, rather than do what we know we should. Help us to change our ways, to become less self-centred and more Christ-centred.

'Lord, in your mercy', please reply, 'Hear our prayer'.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord 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.

Our next 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)*

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

Sovereign God, every day you bless us with your love, so we offer ourselves to act as your earthly hands as we help neighbours who are in need or any kind of trouble. We recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all, by campaigning to relieve 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 and even celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to divide us.

We remember in our prayer people from the Developing World who are desperately short of COVID19 vaccines, at the same time that surplus vaccines are becoming time-expired in warehouses. We pray that excess vaccines will be distributed, in order that our poorer brothers and sisters will be protected against the pandemic and so fewer strains of COVID emerge.

Lord of shalom, we pray for peace in a time of heightened tensions between Ukraine and Russia which could spill into open conflict. Indeed, we pray that you will teach the leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force. May they to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace prevail. Remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and peace. Grant them the support and encouragement they need to find healing in body, mind and spirit as well as being able to rebuild their lives. We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where catastrophic famines and conflicts threaten the lives of millions. We ask that governments and relief agencies are able to avert a large-scale catastrophe in these countries.

Gracious Lord, Jesus came to bring healing and wellbeing, so we ask you to look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, particularly those whose condition is a result of events of the last two years of pandemic. Help them find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your loving presence in their need.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who have lost loved-ones because of COVID19, or others who have died during this pandemic and for whom mourning has been restricted; we pray for those who are suffering from long COVID19, for all who have who lost employment, or who are burdened by debt because of the end of furlough or because of lockdown; we think of neighbours who are lonely, afraid, or who feel abandoned, people whose relationships have broken down and children whose education and wellbeing have been damaged during the pandemic.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness: Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but embrace everybody for whom we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church as we begin to emerge from the shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways to serve our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts.

Lord, don't let us forget the people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: workers in the NHS, carers both in homes and in the community, scientists who are developing both anti-COVID vaccines and medicines, besides the army of key-workers in production, transportation, warehousing and retail throughout the country. Bless them all and may they remain successful and safe in their work.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 6 verses 17 to 26

He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn by the prolific and long-lived Methodist Minister, Revd. Fred Prat Green. It was written in 1969, entitled "the Caring Church". Hymn number 415, 'The Church of Christ, in every age,'

1. The Church of Christ, in every age,

Beset by change, but Spirit led,

Must claim and test its heritage / And keep on rising from the dead.

2. Across the world, across the street,

The victims of injustice cry

For shelter and for bread to eat,

And never live until they die.

3. Then let the servant Church arise,

A caring Church that longs to be

A partner in Christ's sacrifice,

And clothed in Christ's humanity.

4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,

Can cure the fever in our blood

And teach us how to share our bread

And feed the starving multitude.

5. We have no mission but to serve

In full obedience to our Lord:

To care for all, without reserve,

And spread his liberating Word.

© F. Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

Sermon: "Blessings and woes" Luke 6:17 – 26

In Matthew's gospel, the Sermon on the Mount began with what are called 'The Beatitudes', while Luke has his blessings and woes as a sermon on the plain. The use of "Blessed" at the beginning of each of the character qualities to which Jesus refers, is a poor translation of the Greek '**Makarios**', which is better rendered as 'happy', or better still, 'fortunate'. The Good News Bible uses 'happy', not in the sense of being cheerful, or content, but to be congratulated. So, what qualities does Christ advocate and declare those who possess them as being fortunate? They may seem absurd today, because there is no mention of celebrity, fame, wealth, power over others, nor pre-eminence in public gatherings. Instead, Jesus tells us what really matters in our attitudes as disciples.

Jesus copied the style of Old Testament poetical books to outline the qualities of true discipleship, where we accede to the demands of God's kingdom. Let us examine what Jesus regards as kingdom qualities. He addressed the disciples directly when he declared, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God", for he was not advocating poverty and by comparison condemning wealthy people, but was acknowledging that the disciples lacked resources and had to rely on God's provision. Unlike the worldly, they do not use their talents for their own benefit, to gain wealth or power, which the world reveres, but instead they offer their gifts for the benefit of others. The kingdom of heaven consists of such men and women.

'Blessed are you who hunger now', refers to people with a strong desire to obtain righteousness, to lead holy lives in God's kingdom. These people knew that even trying to follow the 613 Rules of Righteousness scrupulously and offering sacrifices when they fell short was not enough to draw really close to the Almighty. They were waiting for God's kingdom to be established on earth. Jesus declared that they would be rewarded, for their desires would be satisfied, though this required him becoming the One perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

'Those who weep now' does not necessarily mean the bereaved, or penitent: they are people who are saddened by the state of the world, by their own failings and inability to set things right, and who turn to the Lord in their distress. Jesus declares they will find inner peace through God's salvation and laugh for joy.

'Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man' means all who suffer in material terms, or who are scorned by the worldly for living as God directs them, for not compromising their conscience in order to gain favour, or wealth, or power. They are people who are willing to stand up and be counted when they see injustice, or evil at work, even though they may suffer for doing so. Jesus ended by warning followers that they might well face persecution and character assassination as a result, but called them not only to be strong but even to be glad in their suffering, for prophets had often been persecuted and rejected. Indeed, Christ would be put to suffering and would be killed for being true to God the Father.

The woes are not intended as Christ's curse, but effectively means 'how unfortunate are those' and they seem to be have been addressed to wealthy Pharisees among the crowd who loved and put their faith in material possessions. Just as he was not advocating poverty, Jesus didn't attack all wealthy people. His attitude is reflected in

John Wesley's sermon, 'The right use of money': 'Earn all you can; save all you can; give all you can as long as ever you can'. I'm confident Jesus would approve of Bill and Melinda Gates' use of their wealth via their Foundation. No, the rich Christ alluded to were those who felt self-sufficient and were far less likely to accept the Good News and felt no need to rely on God. Indeed, the phrase, 'those that are full' means more than people who have enough food: it refers to all who are satisfied with their wealth, who don't consider giving to needy neighbours, who lack the desire to seek either their own salvation by following Jesus, or to try to improve the lot of less fortunate people. 'Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep', is certainly not a rejection of laughter, for Jesus spoke against the killjoy attitude of many in the Jewish religious establishment. Laughter here means self-satisfaction, indifference to the plight of others and spiritual complacency. A time would come when they would see the error of their ways, but it would be too late.

The final woe, 'when all men speak well of you', indicts all who've sacrificed deeply-held principles in order to court favour. Truth would be an early victim for those who sought popularity and the Old Testament records how true prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah suffered for standing up for the truth, whereas Hananiah contradicted Jeremiah's warning to please King Zedekiah – but Jeremiah proclaimed the truth. Christ calls us to be true to the gospels and to ourselves, even if we become unpopular by doing so. It is worth noting that these blessings and woes echo a warning from Jeremiah, who saw that people who regard themselves as self-sufficient often don't feel the need to rely on God, or indeed to make room for God in their lives. Those who put their trust in God, who acknowledge his grace and goodness will receive his blessing, though not necessarily in material terms.

We may well feel these qualities are beyond us and it's certainly difficult for us to possess all of them: yet Jesus demonstrated each in his earthly ministry: he gave up the glories of heaven to live among us; he placed himself in his Father's hands and trusted him enough to face crucifixion to save us; he trusted he would be raised and glorified. Jesus was humble, despite being the Son of God and though he did not seek earthly riches, he freely shared the most important thing he possessed: REDEMPTIVE LOVE. ***May we be as generous with our gifts of the Spirit, to build up one another and be a blessing to our neighbours. Amen.***

We conclude our worship with a hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Usually, they set their hymns to old Scots ballads, but this uses a Fifteenth Century carol tune, "Noel nouvelet". 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.

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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.