

**A service for 14<sup>th</sup> May, 2023 – Christian Aid (StF)**

**Call to worship: Psalm 47 verses 1, 2 and 5 to 7**

Clap your hands, all you nations; shout to God with cries of joy. How awesome is the LORD Most High. God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise. Amen.

*Our opening hymn reminds us of our constant need for the light of God's love 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 Pray.**

Creator God, you have planted the seed of love in our hearts, in our souls, in our lives. We long for the brightness of your presence drawing ever closer to you and to one another, as we join with your people at all times in all places to worship and to serve. Thank you for this wonderful planet upon which we live, for all you give us and do for us and especially for the life, death and resurrection of our dear Saviour, Jesus Christ, through whom the power of sin and death has been broken and by whom we are offered eternal life through faith in him, not anything we can earn by our works, not anything we

deserve. Lord, your grace and goodness are amazing, so we offer you our adoration today.

Merciful Lord, we confess those frequent times when we have been stony ground, too hard to value the tiny seed, the generous smile, the heartfelt word. We often fail to value the generosity of your love and fail to respond with all our heart, mind and strength by caring for our neighbours. We seek more than we need, are careless in responding to the needs of others, tacitly accepting a world that smothers the dreams of those with less power and wealth. Forgive us for our failure to love our neighbours and kindle our hearts with the desire to change our ways.

Creator God, once again, you have planted the seed of love in our hearts, in our souls, in our lives. We draw near today in the knowledge that your forgiveness waters the seed and nurtures us with the power of your Spirit to grow, to flourish and to bear the fruit of your justice now and forevermore. Guide us with the selfless example of Christ Jesus, so we be a blessing to our neighbours in his holy name. 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 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)***

## 'Christian Aid Week feature'

### Esther Saizi and her pigeon peas

Esther Saizi is a warm-hearted, kind woman from Malawi, a country in the south-east of Africa. Malawi is a beautiful country with cooler mountains in the north, the waters of Lake Malawi in the east and sun-drenched lowlands in the south. Malawians are friendly, so friendly in fact that Malawi has a nickname, 'The Heart of Africa'. Unfortunately, the climate crisis has led to frequent cyclones and drought that have had a devastating effect on its farmlands. In fact, a Cyclone Freddy in March this year resulted in severe flooding and the loss of 190 lives. Moreover, the climate crisis has made it increasingly difficult to grow the foods Esther and her neighbours need to support their families. It is not only the weather, but the seeds they sow are often too old to grow successfully, especially with global warming, added to which the cost of food and fuel is rising, as it is here in the United Kingdom.

Esther grows pigeon peas which, unlike ordinary peas, can be used to make delicious bread. By selling this bread, Esther can pay for her grandson to go to nursery school and help her children fulfil their dreams. However, many Malawian farmers are exploited by big companies and don't receive a fair price for their produce, so Esther and other in her community are working with Christian Aid. Together, they have formed co-operatives to secure fairer prices, improved the quality of the seeds they sow, increasing output, even in challenging conditions, adding value by baking and selling bread made from pigeon peas and building warehouses to store the peas against bad weather and floods. They have also produced a pigeon pea recipe book to add to their income and boost sales.

Esther says that she belongs to a community that helps one another, so if somebody is facing a crisis, he or she is not alone, but is supported by neighbours. By supporting Christian Aid, we support Esther and her neighbours to care for one another as they strive to fulfil their dreams.

In one of today's readings, Jesus told his followers this parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." For Esther and her community the pigeon peas are like a mustard seed that grows from insignificance into something that meets the hopes and dreams for their children and grandchildren, by allowing them to receive an education, start their own businesses and help their friends and neighbours. Even if you think that what you can offer to support Christian Aid is a little like a mustard seed, remember that, pooled with other donations, the effect may be beyond what you imagined.

***We come with our prayer of intercession for our world. Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us this wonderful, fruitful and self-sustaining world and for all the blessings we receive from you. Help us to serve our neighbours as your earthly hands, doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can for as long as we can. However, as we have heard today, situations we face are often beyond our powers, but not yours, for nothing is impossible to you. Therefore, when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess such wisdom, wealth and power, so they may bring about healing in our broken world.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are suffering from poverty and injustice. The rise in inflation, food and energy costs is pushing many people in our community into poverty, so we thank you for food banks, warm spaces and breakfast and holiday clubs which provide needy children with

meals. We are aware, too, that the Developing World has been severely affected by the rising cost of everyday essentials, especially in countries affected by drought, famine, flooding and earthquakes, most of which are the effects of climate change because we have failed in our stewardship of the earth.

We pray for aid to reach the victims of natural disasters, especially grain and oil that is being sent from Ukrainian ports. May other nations be generous in offering aid, not only in the short term, but until affected populations can support themselves. Bless people like Esther Saizi and women like her, who bring their communities together; farmers who provide essential food for their communities and cooperatives which give people more power over their own lives. Today, we ask a special blessing upon work being done by Christian Aid to provide such victims with desperately-needed aid and which seeks to end the exploitation of many poorer countries by Big Business.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life, failed relationships and bereavement. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns for them to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them. ....

Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer to our prayer, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support. However, enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are afflicted by warfare and terrorism. We pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine, and Sudan, where conflict is having a direct effect on food security and Afghanistan where the obduracy of the Taliban is making it difficult for food aid to be delivered. We pray for the governments of the nations, that they may act justly and mercifully, for without justice and compassion there can be no real peace. Gracious God, remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, that they will receive justice and healing and can rebuild their lives in hope and security. May peace begin in our hearts, so we live out what we ask for the world. may bear a Christian witness and offer peace for hostility and loving-kindness for hatred.

Lord our Redeemer, we pray for this church, churches in our Circuit, neighbouring circuits and, indeed the World Church, that we learn to take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. Unite us in outreach and help us bear the gospel light to a world darkened by materialism, want and selfishness. Grant us faith to answer our call to serve the risen Lord.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, help us lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with friends and strangers alike, so we glorify the name of Jesus our Saviour and Friend. Amen.

**The Old Testament reading is Joel chapter 1 verses 10 to 12 and chapter 2 verses 21 and 22.**

The fields are ruined, the ground is dried up; the grain is destroyed, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails. Despair, you farmers, wail, you vine growers; grieve for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field is destroyed. The vine is dried up and the fig-tree is withered; the pomegranate, the palm and the apple tree— all the trees of the field—are dried up. Surely the joy of mankind is withered away.

Be not afraid, O land; be glad and rejoice. Surely the LORD has done great things. Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the open pastures are becoming green. The trees are bearing their fruit; the fig-tree and the vine yield their riches. Amen.

For people in Malawi, crops have been ruined by a deadly cyclone, 'Freddy', that twice made landfall in Africa between 6<sup>th</sup> February and 15<sup>th</sup> March this year. On the second date, Malawi was severely flooded and 190 people died as a result of the cyclone. By a bitter irony, many countries in the Horn of Africa have had no rain for three years and their crops have failed. For all these nations, Joel's words are all too true.

**Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 13 verses 31 to 35**

He told them another parable:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches." He told them still another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world." Amen.

*We are going to sing a hymn written in 1974 by Bryn Rees, a Congregational Minister who served mainly in Eastern and South Eastern England. It has four common settings, which makes it an organist's nightmare. However, the melody 'Tetherdown' was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister, so that is my choice for today. We shall sing hymn 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}

**Sermon: "The mustard seed and yeast" Matthew 13:31 – 35**

When my father was serving with Desert Air Force in the Second World War, he witnessed a swarm of locusts, described how the sky was darkened by them and said how they destroyed vegetation remarkably quickly and were unstoppable. We know little about Joel, except his father's name and commentators speculate that he lived between four and eight hundred years before Christ. It is difficult to determine when the plague of locust-devastation he described occurred and therefore whether it was also a metaphor

for invasion by the Assyrians or Babylonians which led to the defeat of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of the Jews. What our reading tells us of is the mourning of people whose lifeline disappears. It is heart-breaking, that Joel's lament is shared by many nations in the Horn of Africa and in Afghanistan today, where, largely because of climate change, there have been droughts lasting for years, leading to crop failure and the deaths of much of the livestock. Malawi, further to the south, was laid waste by Cyclone Freddy – too much water rather than none at all. Malnutrition has weakened the populations, so approximately thirteen million people are already at risk of starvation.

Of course, with the cost of living crisis, rising inflation, energy and food costs in our own country, some people may be tempted to reason that it is better to concentrate on our own needs and, when they have been satisfied, to look further afield. We need to resist such a parochial view, for although life has become grim for so many in the United Kingdom, it is difficult to envisage the scale of the disaster that awaits the Developing World if we don't act. Don't be misled to think that we are supporting feckless people, for in Christian Aid's current campaign, the story of Esther and many like her shows the opposite. They are doing everything they can to support themselves, but they do need our help.

Despite the disaster the land faced, Joel used a familiar biblical phrase, 'Do not be afraid' and went on to declare, 'surely the Lord has done great things'. Jesus frequently told people not to be afraid and trust in the Lord and surely God has done and is still doing great things. We are in the sixth week after Easter, when we recall the most amazing thing the Lord has done for all humankind – a demonstration of his inexhaustible, freely-given love. God has shown us mercy – **chesed** in Hebrew which also means compassion or loving-kindness. Our natural response should be to show practical compassion to our poorer brothers and sisters, here and abroad. Now I can already feel some of you thinking that the scale of suffering in the Developing World is so great that anything we offer will make no difference – which brings me to our gospel reading.

The parables of the mustard seed and the small measure of yeast were meant to show how a small amount of faith can grow exponentially with the might of the Holy Spirit, or how a small group of followers were able to grow into a huge, unstoppable Church a tree that allowed birds to shelter in its branches – in other words, a church that accommodates all-comers, not just an exclusive few. However, if that mustard seed represents our gift, small though it may be, when combined with the offerings of others, it will make a big difference. Like a small amount of yeast, our gift can help feed many. By giving what we can, we become bearers of good news, as Christ commissioned us to.

The good news is we can by supporting Christian Aid, an ecumenical charity founded in 1945. It doesn't only provide food, water and shelter when disasters occur, but works with communities to give them the dignity of becoming self-sufficient by providing tools, equipment, hardy varieties of crops that can grow in difficult conditions and precious water supplies, without which life itself can't exist.

Perhaps the only real positive change COVID 19 brought was a more neighbourly concern in most of our communities. We need to extend that concern to neighbours far away, too, so they can enjoy the fullness of life that independence offers, to give Esther and her community the chance to live before they die, to misquote Fred Pratt Green's "The Church of Christ, in every age".

Jesus assured his disciples, and that includes us, **'I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He or she will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you**

ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.' As we journey through Eastertide towards Pentecost, remember we don't act in our own strength, for Christ sent the Holy Spirit to work in us and through us, if we let him. Let us live faithfully, prayerfully and generously, seeking to build God's kingdom on unbreakable foundations of love. Amen.

*Our closing hymn is Sydney Carter's, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?' which he wrote in 1965. You may not know that, during the 1950s and 60s, Sydney worked as a lyricist for Donald Swann in the famous revues of Flanders and Swann. Just think, we could be singing, 'mud, mud glorious mud'! Instead, let us stand and sing, hymn number 256, 'When I needed a neighbour, were you there?'*

**1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?**

**When I needed a neighbour, were you there? Chorus:**

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,  
Were you there?*

**2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?**

**I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? Chorus:**

**3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?**

**I was cold, I was naked, were you there? Chorus:**

**4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?**

**When I needed a shelter, were you there? Chorus:**

**5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?**

**When I needed a healer, were you there? Chorus:**

**6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,**

**Wherever you travel, I'll be there, Chorus:**

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,  
I'll be there.*

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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 evermore. Amen.

