

A service for 14th July, 2024 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 24 verses 1 to 5

The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.

Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and a pure heart, who do not lift up their soul to an idol or swear by what is false. They will receive blessing from the LORD and vindication from God their Saviour. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's grace 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:*

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Let us pray

Living God, you are the Author of all life throughout the universe, the sustainer of all and Saviour of humankind. We have come here to offer our best in worship and adoration, for in the beauty of our world we see the revelation of your wisdom and creative might. Lord, we are astonished that you have honoured us by seeking to draw us close to in a relationship where we may call you "Abba", 'Father'.

Despite the Law given to Moses and the teaching 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 came not only to show us how we ought to live, but died at Calvary to atone for the sins of the whole world. He broke the hold of sin by his death and, when he was raised from the tomb, ensured that death does not have the final word by offering us everlasting life. That is truly amazing grace, O Lord! Living God, you are the Author of all life throughout the universe, the sustainer of all and Saviour of humankind, so we come to praise your Holy Name. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the good things we enjoy; for this wonderful planet, 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. Merciful Lord, forgive us when we are unfaithful, self-righteous and judgmental in our dealings with our neighbours.

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

Lord of life, 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. As we acknowledge our failings and turn back to you, forgive us, restore us to righteousness, and breathe new life into the embers of our faith.

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

Merciful Lord, we believe that as you hear and answer our prayers, you have already pardoned us and call us to follow once more. Lord God, teach us to share your gift of love and joy 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. 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.**

© *Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)*

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.

God our heavenly Father, we acknowledge the wonders and beauty of the world, but we are also aware of how broken it is, often by human greed, spite, pride and indifference. In Jesus' name we ask you to guide and empower us as we answer our call to serve our neighbours, but we recognize that we can't make as many changes we would like to see on our own. Nevertheless, help us serve conscientiously and when the best we can do is not enough, then reach out and warm the hearts of people who have greater power and influence to act instead.

We pray for this church at Cole Street, the churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Teach us to speak of the love and beauty of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity. May the Holy Spirit help us employ our love, gifts and graces to proclaim Jesus as the Saviour of the world. May our words and deeds of love bravely carry the gospel light to this strife-ridden and broken world.

Jesus declared, peacemakers to be children of God, so at a time when they are desperately – needed, we ask you to bless everyone who is working for peace: for negotiators and both aid-workers and medics, particularly those on the front line. May they enjoy success and remain safe in their work. We pray for a just and swift end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza and Somalia and for gang warfare in Haiti to cease. Lord, may the tensions between Iran and Israel, especially with Hezbollah in Lebanon, not escalate into open warfare. Lord, inspire national leaders to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, instead of resorting to force. May they govern with mercy and

justice which are the foundations of lasting peace. Lord, remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression. May they receive the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives and find healing in body, mind and spirit.

Lord of creation, the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend is evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, as highlighted by the super-hurricane Beryl which has caused serious damage and loss of life in the Caribbean and the southern states of America. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by becoming less wasteful, reducing pollution and using only the resources we need.

We remember people we know who are ill in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear and is finding bereavement unbearable. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.

..... Lord, help us provide them with both practical support and friendship, but enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they may be comforted, find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us free from harm and inspire us to share the abundance of your love with both friends and strangers, to glorify you in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

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.

We continue our worship with a hymn by Gerald Coates and Noel Richards. It was this darkness that John the Baptist spoke out against, darkness that Jesus brought the light of love to defeat and the same light which we are charged to continue to bear 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)

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, imprisonment and murder.

Today's reading began with Herod Antipas receiving news of a startling new rabbi, who was gaining fame as a healer and miracle worker in the province. Herod's first reaction was to believe the rabbi 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 rabbi's works. Herod's belief was unshaken, for he was deeply burdened by guilt at having the Baptist beheaded, although 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 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. Nazirites were pledged to live simply and faithfully for as long as the vow lasted. Nazirites 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 the Lord 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 sinner in his sights was the ruler of the country, with 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 – so 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 Christ 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 for all people, even if our opposition makes us unpopular with the wrongdoers. In an age when it is unfashionable to do so, we should be willing to raise our head above the parapet and expose evil, or injustice. Consider the courage needed a few years ago by whistle-blowers who exposed the abuses at Stafford Hospital, or Alan Bates and his fight for justice for postmasters caught up in the Horizon affair, 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. Think what might have happened had they kept silent.

Evil will 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 on television 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 a hymn by John Bell and the late Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Usually, they set their hymns to old Scots ballads, but this uses a Fifteenth Century French 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 evermore. Amen.