

## A Service for 14<sup>th</sup> September, 2025 (StF)

### Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 7

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Amen.

*The author of our first hymn, David J. Evans, was involved in the beginning of the house church / charismatic movements, which saw the introduction of many 'new hymns and choruses'. However, he grew ever more concerned about many new hymns became over-familiar towards God, trivialising him and ignoring his holiness, power and glory. As a result, he wrote both words and music for, 'Be still, for the presence of the Lord' in 1985. We shall sing hymn number 20.*

**1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here;**

**Come bow before Him now with reverence and fear.**

**In Him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground;**

**Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.**

**2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;**

**He burns with holy fire, with splendour He is crowned.**

**How awesome is the sight, our radiant King of light;**

**Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.**

**3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;**

**He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister His grace.**

**No work too hard for Him, in faith receive from Him;**

**Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place.     © David J. Evans**

### ***Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, help us feel your presence among us as we come to worship and adore you on this Sabbath day, for you are the Creator whose wisdom brought all life into being throughout our universe. Your compassion and power sustain life and we know you are gracious, faithful, true, majestic and holy. Your glory is revealed in the vastness of space with its myriad suns, planets and moons, whilst the beauty and complexity of life on this planet fill us with awe. We are amazed all the more that you care for us so much that you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Help us to pray to you in faith, sing our hymns joyfully and both understand and respond to your holy word.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many blessings we have received from you: for all the good things that we enjoy, as well as experiences and opportunities that have enriched our lives; for challenges that have tested us and shaped our character. Above all else, thank you for Jesus, whose death and resurrection broke the power of sin and death, and offers us new life at the end of our earthly days.

Merciful God, although Jesus showed us how we should live, we confess that we don't always follow his teaching or his example, for we sometimes say and do things that upset, or hurt other people and grieve you. Moreover, we don't always help those we see in difficulty, or distress when we really know we ought to. Gracious God, we are truly sorry

and turn away from what is wrong, asking you to forgive us for the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God of grace, we believe you have heard and answered our prayer, pardoning us for our sins and calling us to renew our discipleship. Therefore, Lord, fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit, so we may serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully from now onwards, in Jesus' beautiful name. 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 Robert Walmsley for Whitsuntide celebrations, just over a hundred years ago. Mr. Walmsley was a jeweller from Manchester, a member of a Congregational church and a long-serving Sunday School teacher. Hymn number 443, 'Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,'*

1. Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,  
Tender and true;  
Out of the heart of the Father above,  
Streaming to me and to you;  
Wonderful love  
Dwells in the heart of the Father above.
2. Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,  
Joyfully came;  
Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,  
Sharing their sorrow and shame;  
Seeking the lost,  
Saving, redeeming at measureless cost.
3. Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;  
Why do they roam?  
Love only waits to forgive and forget;  
Home, weary wanderer, home!  
Wonderful love  
Dwells in the heart of the Father above.
4. Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,  
Come and abide,  
Lifting my life, till it rises above  
Envy and falsehood and pride,  
Seeking to be  
Lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

© Robert Walmsley {1831 – 1905}

***We shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God.***

Heavenly Father, the colours of autumn highlight the beauty of the world on which we live, but the brokenness we hear about in the news Media is heart-breaking. We know the

limitations of our power, but Lord, where we are able, enable us to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out to our neighbours in their need or distress. Grant us compassion, courage, steadfastness and empathy when we serve others in Jesus' name, but where the best we can do is not enough, we ask you to intervene, for everything is possible for you.

Author of peace and Lord of all, hear our prayer for the leaders of the nations of the world. Warm their hearts and inspire them to govern with mercy and justice. Teach them to negotiate when disputes arise and to compromise in order to avoid warfare. It is heart-breaking to see almost daily reports about the injuries, deaths, deprivation and destruction in Ukraine and the Holy Land which falls very short of its title because of the continued holding of hostages and the appalling conditions imposed upon ordinary Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank. We pray for a just ending to the fighting in those lands and for an end to strife in other countries, too, including Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Lord, so much needs to be done, but let peace begin in our own hearts, in the way we co-exist with our neighbours.

Heavenly Father, we pray for victims of global warming, where strong storms, floods, drought and wildfires are wreaking great destruction. Help all humankind to take greater care of this planet over which we have been made stewards. Let us waste less, recycle more, pollute less and use only the resources we need, so that future generations inherit a healthier planet.

Lord of shalom, we remember neighbours who are sick, in body, mind or spirit, for those who are in any kind of need, or trouble, for neighbours who are lonely or who have lost someone dear. In a time of silence, we name people about whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will understand their need and will reach out to them..... Heavenly Father, may we offer practical support wherever possible to those for whom we pray, but we ask that you will enfold them with your love, offering healing, hope, renewed strength, courage and, not least of all, lasting peace.

Holy God, we offer our prayer for our church, other churches in our Circuit and in neighbouring Circuits and also the Church throughout the world. Unite us in Spirit, love and truth. Teach us to work together and give us the courage to bring good news to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world which desperately needs such news.

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the abundance of your love with both friend and stranger, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

### **Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 15 verses 1 to 10**

Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Then Jesus told them this parable:

"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls

her friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Amen.

*In 1886, when Francis Rowley was in his third year as pastor of First Baptist Church, North Adams, he was assisted by a remarkable young Swiss singer and musician, Peter Bilhorn. It was Peter Bilhorn who, after a Sunday evening service, suggested that Pastor Rowley ought to write a hymn which he would set to music. That same night the words, 'Can't you sing the wondrous story?' came to the pastor's mind. Peter Bilhorn was as good as his word and composed a tune, entitled 'Wondrous Story'. Both hymn and its original melody appeared in Sankey's "Gospel Hymns number 5" of 1887 and shortly afterwards featured in his "Sacred Songs and Solos". We, however, are going to sing it to "Hyfrydol" / "Calon Lan", a Welsh melody! Hymn number 323, 'I will sing the wondrous story'*

1. I will sing the wondrous story  
Of the Christ who died for me,  
How He left the realms of glory  
For the cross on Calvary: *Chorus:*  
*Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story*  
*Of the Christ who died for me,*  
*Sing it with his saints in glory,*  
*Gathered by the crystal sea.*

2. I was lost; but Jesus found me,  
Found the sheep that went astray,  
Raised me up, and gently led me,  
Back into the narrow way: *Chorus:*

3. Faint was I, and fears possessed me,  
Bruised was I from many a fall;  
Hope was gone, and shame distressed me;  
But his love has pardoned all: *Chorus:*

4. Days of darkness still come o'er me;  
Sorrow's paths I often tread;  
But the Saviour still is with me,  
By his hand I'm safely led: *Chorus:*

5. He will keep me till the river  
Rolls its waters at my feet;  
Then he'll bear me safely over,  
Where the loved ones I shall meet: *Chorus:*

© Francis Harold Rowley {1854 – 1952}

**Sermon:** 'I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.' Luke 15:10  
This event in Luke's gospel occurred during a period when Jesus had begun to face serious opposition from the Sanhedrin which thought him to be a false prophet, an agitator who could bring disaster upon the Jewish people. They would have heard of his healings and miracles which are pointers to him being the Messiah, but his teaching seemed at



odds with their interpretation of the Law and the prophets. He criticised traditions which they had made almost as binding as Torah and seemed to seek out the poor and marginalised in society, rather than the affluent, influential Pharisees. They reasoned that this ordinary Galilean – a despised province to Judeans – could not be God's anointed if he mixed with 'sinners'.

The lectionary reading a fortnight ago told us that Christ was being closely-watched by leading Pharisees and Scribes when he was a guest of a Sabbath meal at the house of a Pharisee. Today's reading is set when Jesus was teaching a crowd, many of whom were tax-collectors and "sinners". The watching Scribes and Pharisees effectively rejected both Jesus and his word, because he **"welcomes sinners and eats with them."** As far as they were concerned, these sinners were far beyond redemption, especially tax-collectors who were considered collaborators with their Roman occupiers, extortionists and thieves, too. No true prophet would have anything to do with such people. They were blind to God's willingness to forgive even major sins, to offer all-comers a second chance.

Jesus' parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin were rebukes to the Scribes and Pharisees for their stiff-necked exclusiveness, shown in their attitudes to the **'sinners'** with whom Jesus shared table fellowship. The parable of a shepherd seeking one lost sheep from a flock of a hundred would have meant more to First Century Jews for whom wool trade was very important. If any sheep died, or were killed, the shepherd was expected to return its fleece to his master to prove what had happened, lest the shepherd's integrity be questioned – hence our shepherd's painstaking search and subsequent rejoicing as he plodded back with the sheep on his shoulders, once he'd found it. **What may be missed in this story is that God is the shepherd and it is he who's seeking out the lost sinner, not the sinner who's returning to the Lord. God does everything in his power to draw everyone to him.**

The second parable explains why each of us so valuable to the Lord, for the silver coin that was lost – **a Drachma** – represented a man's daily pay, but was probably part of the married woman's headdress with ten coins linked with a silver chain. In either case, the loss couldn't be borne easily by an ordinary person. The floor of ordinary houses at the time of Jesus was hard earth, often weed-covered, so a lost coin would be very difficult to find, especially as houses had small windows, so their interiors were extremely gloomy. Despite this, the woman made a supreme effort to find the missing drachma and when she had found it, she called her neighbours to rejoice with her. In other words, everyone is precious to God, so he seeks out the 'lost', rather than abandoning them. We're so precious that God redeemed us from sin with Son's death. Never forget that when Christ hung on the cross, he died for the forgiveness of everyone's sins, not only ours. When he was raised, he offered the promise of eternal life for all who'll receive him, not just an exclusive few who consider themselves superior.

Rather like **Calvinists' belief in predestination**, the Pharisees and Scribes felt that they had been predestined God's elect, because they scrupulously observed the 613 rules of Torah, whilst the **'sinners'** were beyond salvation. Our Lord, on the other hand, offered hope and forgiveness to all who turned to him, demonstrating that God the Father welcomes all to his banquet, not those who consider themselves righteous. These readings challenge us to avoid the trap of condemning other people for the, for their lifestyle, for that will only alienate them, just as the **'righteous'** Jews were effectively separated from **'sinners'**. Do we alienate ourselves from neighbours because they are

different from us, or don't share our opinions or values? Think how much bitterness is being generated – even within families, let alone between friends by different attitudes about asylum-seekers who cross the English Channel on inflatable boats. Consider the polarization of the public with regard to what is happening in Gaza. We mustn't give up on people because of their opinions, for if we do, there is little to no chance they will change. Instead, we need to engage with them, to share their journey, even though we do not share their views. Effectively, we are called to love the sinner, but hate the sin by demonstrating the love of Christ by how we live day by day.

Do our words and actions reflect the love of Jesus? **Do we offer encouragement for others to change, or is our rectitude as prickly as sackcloth? How often do we pray for people whose lifestyle is clearly an affront to God that they may be saved through Jesus, or do we just write them off as beyond hope?** As Methodists we are taught: **all need to be saved; all can be saved; all may know themselves saved and all may be saved to the uttermost. May God give us the faith and grace to hold this creed fast in our hearts, so we may bring the strayed and lost back to Christ's fold where they belong. Amen.**

*Our closing hymn is a version of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which was written and composed by Stuart Townend in 1996. This is how it happened in his own words: 'I never set out to write a new musical version of this psalm – it seems very brave, or very arrogant, to think you can improve on the existing hymn version, which has been loved and sung by millions of people for so long! I was actually working on a different song at the time, which after several hours' hard work was not going well... I happened to flick to this psalm in my Bible while taking a break, a simple melody popped into my head, and the whole thing was written in ten minutes. 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**

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

**I will not fear the evil one,**

**For you are with me, and your rod and staff**

**Are the comfort I need to know. Chorus**

**Benediction**

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all forever more. Amen.