

## A service for 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2021

### Call to worship: Psalm 67 verses 1 to 4

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us, that your ways may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations. May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you. May the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you rule the peoples justly and guide the nations of the earth. Amen.

*We open our worship with a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1740 and considered one of his finest hymns by James Montgomery. It was called “A Morning Hymn” by the Wesleys and for a while was believed to have been written by Augustus Toplady, who had a long feud with John Wesley. ‘Christ, whose glory fills the skies’. Hymn number 134.*

**1. Christ, whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ, the true, the only Light,  
Sun of Righteousness, arise,  
Triumph o’er the shades of night;  
Day-spring from on high, be near;  
Day-star, in my heart appear.**

**2. Dark and cheerless is the morn  
Unaccompanied by thee:  
Joyless is the day’s return,  
Till thy mercy’s beams I see,  
Till they inward light impart,  
Glad my eyes and warm my heart.**

**3. Visit then this soul of mine;  
Pierce the gloom of sin and grief;  
Fill me, radiancy divine;  
Scatter all my unbelief;  
More and more thyself display,  
Shining to the perfect day.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

**Let us pray.**

Almighty God, Maker of the universe, Creator of all living things, Source of wisdom and Fountain of grace, we have come to worship and adore you with humble, joyful hearts, for sinful though we are, we know you are always seeking to draw us close to you, to heal our brokenness and feed us with your love. Help us to set aside all distractions and anxieties, so we may receive your blessings as we sing your praises, pray to you and receive your holy word, for we know that you alone are worthy of all honour, glory, praise and power.

Heavenly Father, thank you for all the blessings we receive from you: our lives, people who have guided, inspired and cared for us; experiences and challenges that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through Christ Jesus, your Son, our Saviour, whose life, death and resurrection has freed us from the power of sin and death.

Amazing God, you did all this for us and yet as we consider your holiness, we are aware that, despite our efforts to live as you call us to, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord forgive us for failing to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, for times when our discipleship is half-hearted and occasions when we ignore your call. Help us to change our sinful ways and pardon us in Jesus’ holy name.

God most gracious and holy, you hear and answer our prayers and you throw open your arms to embrace us with forgiveness. Therefore, as we have been freed from the burden of our guilt, may we respond to your grace by answering Christ's call to serve him, faithfully and joyfully, so we may glorify you in his holy name. Amen.

***We say the prayer that Jesus gave 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.**

*We continue our worship with a hymn written by Thomas Troeger, professor of Christian communication at Yale Divinity school and a minister in both the Presbyterian and Episcopal Churches of the USA. Hymn number 260, 'Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,' which is best sung to "Bethany". Hymn number 110.*

**1. Swiftly pass the clouds of glory,  
Heaven's voice, the dazzling light;  
Moses and Elijah vanish;  
Christ alone commands the height!  
Peter, James, and John fall silent,  
Turning from the summit's rise  
Downward toward the shadowed valley  
Where their Lord has fixed his eyes.**

**2. Glimpsed and gone the revelation,  
They shall gain and keep its truth,  
Not by building on the mountain  
Any shrine or sacred booth,  
But by following the Saviour  
Through the valley to the cross  
And by testing faith's resilience  
Through betrayal, pain, and loss.**

**3. Lord, transfigure our perception  
With the purest light that shines,  
And recast our life's intentions  
To the shape of your designs,  
Till we seek no other glory  
Than what lies past Calvary's hill  
And our living and our dying  
And our rising by your will.**

© Thomas Troeger (Born 1945)

***Let us come to God again in prayers of intercession.***

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live and in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the suffering of neighbours both nearby and further afield, more often than not as a result of mankind's failure to live as you call us to. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part to heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that our powers are limited, so many situations are far beyond our powers to remedy, but they are not beyond yours.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for our world. Bestow your blessing upon all peoples and all races, especially the blessing of peace in countries which are suffering the ravages of war, persecution and terrorism. Lord, we bring to you our prayer for the victims of mankind's inhumanity to man. Grant them the support and courage they need to build a new, better and secure future. We pray that the leaders of the world learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force to gain their ends. May the leaders of countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, turn and seek mercy and justice in their dealings. We pray for the population of Myanmar after the military takeover. May there be a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

Loving God, we pray for our community: may we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches and organizations that serve the poor and vulnerable in our society. We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted, both here and abroad. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world.

Help us play our part in building a world where we stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we desire justice for all-comers and always seek the common good; a world where we are willing to work together in mutual trust and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and wisdom to do what is right whether or not it is popular or politically expedient. We ask a special blessing upon the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe. Help them cope with the enormous demands that are being put upon them and protect them in their work.

Lord, lockdown makes us feel disempowered, confused, unsure of what to pray for. Hear and answer the groaning of our spirit and grant us the wisdom and courage we need to face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your boundless, redemptive love.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, remember people who are suffering from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they are given, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are living with a dementia, besides their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them.

We pray for everybody who is facing unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time when we are already burdened with uncertainty. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer friendship and practical support to them.

In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....  
Loving Lord, enfold them all with the warmth of your love, so they experience the fullness of your comfort, hope and peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Keep us free from harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin and may the way we live bring you glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

***We continue our worship with the hymn, 'Transfigured Christ, none comprehends'. It was penned by Alan Gaunt, a Mancunian Congregational minister in 1991. Hymn number 261.***

**1. Transfigured Christ, none comprehends  
Your majesty, whose splendour stuns  
All waking souls; whose light transcends  
The brightness of a thousand suns!**

**2. You stand with Moses on the hill,  
You speak of your new exodus:  
The way through death, you will fulfil  
By dying helpless on the cross.**

**3. You stand here with Elijah, too,  
By whom the still small voice was heard:  
And you, yourself, will prove God true,  
Made mute in death, Incarnate Word.**

**4. If we could bear your brightness here  
And stay for ever in your light,  
Then we would conquer grief and fear,  
And scorn the terrors of the night.**

**5. But, from the heights, you bring us down,  
To share earth's agonies with you,  
Where piercing thorns are made your crown  
And death, accepted, proves love true.**

**6. Majestic Christ, God's well-loved Son,  
If we must share your grief and loss,  
Transfigure us, when all is done,  
With glory shining from your cross.**

© Alan Gaunt (born 1935)

**The Old Testament reading is 2Kings chapter 2 verses 1 to 12**

When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said,

"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked,

"Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "but do not speak of it." Then Elijah said to him,

"Stay here, Elisha; the LORD has sent me to Jericho." And he replied,

"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho. The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him,

"Do you know that the LORD is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "but do not speak of it."

Then Elijah said to him,

"Stay here; the LORD has sent me to the Jordan." And he replied,

"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

Fifty men of the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground. When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

“Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit,” Elisha replied.

“You have asked a difficult thing,” Elijah said, “yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise not.”

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out,

“My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart. Amen.

### **Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 9 verses 2 to 9**

After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus,

“Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud:

“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus.

As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus gave them orders not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. Amen.

*Our next hymn was written in 1854 by Samuel Greg, a kindly mill-owner from Manchester. ‘Hymns and Psalms’ number 158, ‘Stay, Master, stay upon this heavenly hill,’*

**1. Stay, Master, stay upon this heavenly hill;  
A little longer, let us linger still;  
With all the mighty ones of old beside,  
Near to the Aweful Presence still abide;  
Before the throne of light we trembling stand,  
And catch a glimpse into the spirit-land.**

**2. Stay, Master, stay! We breathe a purer air;  
This life is not the life that waits us there;  
Thoughts, feelings, flashes, glimpses come and go;  
We cannot speak them – nay, we do not know;  
Wrapt in this cloud of light we seem to be  
The thing we fain would grow – eternally.**

**3. No, saith the Lord, the hour is past, we go;  
Our home, our life, our duties lie below.  
While here we kneel upon the mount of prayer,  
The plough lies waiting in the furrow there.  
Here we sought God that we might know his will;  
There we must do it, serve him, seek him still.**

© Samuel Greg {1804 – 1876}

### **Sermon: *The Transfiguration* Mark 9: 2 – 9**

Shalom Chaverim! Brothers and sisters, may God’s full blessing be granted you today and always. You ask who I am? Let me introduce myself. I am James Barzebedee, brother of John and follower of the Way, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gentiles around Galilee sometimes call me Jacobus, but John and I are nicknamed the

'Boanerges', or 'Sons of Thunder', by the other disciples because we are passionate by nature and like to be heard! I'm here because the hopeless preacher was at a loss to explain what happened on that mountain near the Sea of Galilee seven days after our friend and partner, Simon Peter, declared Jesus to be the Christ, God's Anointed One. I'm not surprised, for what Peter, John and I saw was so remarkable that we daren't tell anybody until much later, for no one would have believed us!

It had been a confusing week, for Peter had hardly made his declaration when our Master told us that he would be rejected by the religious Establishment, would be killed and would rise from the dead three days later. This talk seemed madness, for we expected that the Messiah would be the warrior king from Isaiah 63, driving our Roman occupiers from our land, his clothes crimson with their blood. He was going to be another King David, a financial wizard who'd restore our economy to greatness, a leader who would compel us to return to faithful worship of the Lord, Elohim. Our Master's talk of suffering and death did not fit in with our ideas of the Messiah, but when Peter protested, he was firmly rebuked for holding onto human and not kingdom values. Peter was rather tetchy for the next few days and we kept quiet lest we upset either our Master, or Peter.

We were surprised then, when Jesus took us up the mountain, because he was going to pray and we expected him to prefer to be alone. We stood there as he bowed down on the summit, with Mount Tabor, some distance away to the west. We had just begun to pray when, suddenly, the Master's clothes became so white they were radiant – light seemed to shine from them: this was no trick of the light – the shining came from within the Lord, not externally! It was painful to look at our Master, but look we did, for two figures seemed to appear from nowhere, joining the Lord and talking with him. We recognised one from his plain camel-hair garment as Elijah, the greatest of the prophets, for everybody had wondered whether or not John the Baptizer was Elijah returned to the world and there was more than a passing resemblance, but the Baptizer was dead, butchered by Herod Antipas at Herodias' behest. The other figure used the word 'exodus' as he talked about the Master's departure at Jerusalem, so the three of us simultaneously realised that he was Moses, the agent of Israel's departure from Egypt and the bringer of Torah, or the Law to our people. We knew both patriarchs had met God on a mountain in the Scriptures, so it was appropriate that they should also meet Jesus 'in glorious splendour'.

We stood at a distance, hardly daring to breathe: Jesus, our friend, was conversing with the two principal figures in Judaism: Elijah and Moses, yet they were clearly deferential to him, which means ..... Jesus is greater than the Torah or the teaching of the prophets ..... which could only mean he is the Son of God! As we struggled to take this in, Peter decided to speak on our behalf, more in terror than anything – he just couldn't keep quiet. "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He told me later that he wanted time to understand what was going on, to hold onto the glorious moment indefinitely.

Such a hope was not to be, for we were instantly enveloped by a cloud – the Shekinah- cloud – from which the Almighty spoke: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!" The three of us were so terrified, we fell face downward, hardly daring to move in God's presence, for it was said that anybody who saw God would perish. I don't know how long we were lying there, but suddenly Jesus tapped our shoulders and bade us not to be afraid. We did as we were told, but as we looked up, we saw that Elijah and Moses had disappeared.

The four of us descended from the summit to our friends below. As we did so, our Master told us not to tell anybody what we had seen until he had risen from the dead. We did not really need to be told, for who'd have believed us? We didn't have long to reflect on what we'd experienced on the mountain top, for even before we reached the bottom, we saw the other disciples engaged in a fierce argument with Scribes, because they could not heal an epileptic boy and our Lord had to call out the evil from the youth, besides rebuking the scoffers. Our moment of wonder was lost in the turmoil of worldly demands, but we recalled it later and learned from it.

The three of us had seen Jesus in all his glory – as God's Son – as the Christ foretold by the prophets. Like Peter, we had wanted to cling onto that moment, but we were called back to the world as it is, to fulfil our discipleship, our resolve reinforced because we know Jesus is the true Saviour of all – doubts set aside. Oh, my friends, I know you will ask why we let our Master down in the Garden of Gethsemane if we had no doubts – and the answer is simple and shameful: we were caught off balance and lost our nerve – which is why Christ sent us the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, for none of us can hope to succeed if we try to work in our own strength.

Whether or not you have had a mountain-top revelation about the true nature of my Lord Jesus, be assured that just as Moses led his people to freedom from slavery in Egypt, so Christ Jesus leads all who will follow to freedom from slavery to sin. Peter, John and I knew that our Master's declaration of his passion, death and resurrection would surely happen, though we did not understand its significance until the Pentecost experience, when the Spirit taught us that Jesus was the one perfect sacrifice for all sin. No longer do we have to try to earn God's forgiveness and favour through works, for we are saved by God's grace and through Jesus we are assured that he loves us to the uttermost. That means we are free to serve him as friends, or co-workers, not as slaves, so let us love and care for our neighbours as willingly as our Master did, not because we are obliged to, but as a response to God's agape – boundless, sacrificial redemptive love for sinners like us.

**Chaverim, brothers and sisters in Christ, let our service be faithful and cheerful, especially in these dark days of the pandemic. Let everybody we meet see the love of Christ in our lives, for unless they do so, they won't accept the Good News and let us lead them to our Master's side. Shabbat shalom! Amen.**

*We close our worship with a hymn by Jacqueline Jones that challenges us. Jacqui is a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the UK for 5 years and now lives in Christchurch, NZ as a vicar's wife! Hymn number 662, 'Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?'*

**1. Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?**

**Are you still prepared to follow?**

**Have you made a choice to remain and serve,  
Though the way be rough and narrow? *Chorus:***

***Will you walk the path that will cost you much***

***And embrace the pain and sorrow?***

***Will you trust in One who entrusts to you***

***The disciples of tomorrow?***

**1. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down  
When the multitudes are silent?**

**Will you make a choice to stand your ground  
When the crowds are turning violent? *Chorus:***

**2. In your city streets will you be God's heart?  
Will you listen to the voiceless?**

**Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,  
Will you share your faith with the faithless? *Chorus:***

**3. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith  
And believe it could be different?**

**Will you share your views using words of grace?  
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? *Chorus:***

***We will walk the path that will cost us much  
And embrace the pain and sorrow.***

***We will trust in One who entrusts to us***

***The disciples of tomorrow.***

© Jacqueline G. Jones

***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.