

**Call to Worship: Psalm 34 verses 14 and 15**

Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry; Amen.

*We are here to worship God, to celebrate motherhood and remember the Church is like a good mother who helps us to grow in faith and love. Our opening hymn is by Mart Haugen, a liturgical composer and musical performer from Minnesota. He is composer-in-residence at Mayflower Community Congregational Church in Minneapolis. The house in this hymn is Mother Church, a community, rather than a building. Hymn number 409, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell,'*

**1. Let us build a house where love can dwell**

**And all can safely live,**

**A place where saints and children tell**

**How hearts learn to forgive.**

**Built of hopes and dreams and visions,**

**Rock of faith and vault of grace;**

**Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: *Chorus***

*All are welcome,*

*All are welcome,*

*All are welcome in this place.*

**2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,**

**And words are strong and true,**

**Where all God's children dare to seek**

**To dream God's reign anew.**

**Here the cross shall stand as witness**

**And of symbol of God's grace;**

**Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: *Chorus***

**3. Let us build a house where love is found**

**In water, wine and wheat:**

**A banquet hall on holy ground**

**Where peace and justice meet.**

**Here the love of God, through Jesus,**

**Is revealed in time and space;**

**As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: *Chorus***

**4. Let us build a house where hands will reach**

**Beyond the wood and stone**

**To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,**

**And live the Word they've known.**

**Here the outcast and the stranger**

**Bear the image of God's face;**

**Let us bring an end to fear and danger: *Chorus***

**5. Let us build a house where all are named,**

**Their songs and visions heard**

**And loved and treasured, taught and claimed**

**As words within the Word.**

**Built of tears and cries and laughter,**

**Prayers of faith and songs of grace,**

**Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: *Chorus*      © *Marty Haugen (born 1950)***

***Let us pray.***

Almighty God, you are the Source of Life, the Creator of our universe and all who live in it. In your limitless power and wisdom, you formed myriad galaxies of stars, planets and moons. You created a beautiful, self-sustaining world on which we live on and produced a wide variety of plant and animal life that fill us with wonder. It is truly amazing that you care for frail, sinful human beings, yet you do so with a redemptive love which we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. Lord, as we come to offer you our adoration and praise, we ask you to take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate your holiness, goodness and glory. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we come offer our thanks for the many blessings we receive from you day by day, for you continuing to love us even when we are selfish, loveless and disobedient, but most of all for the amazing gift of your Son, Jesus, who not only showed us how you want us to live, but became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. As we journey through Lent may we humbly remember how Christ Jesus faced rejection, betrayal and death upon the cross, for our sakes, because only through his crucifixion and resurrection could he break the power of sin and death.

Amazing God, you are holy, gracious and merciful, but we know that, despite our efforts to live as you desire, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord forgive us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves, when our discipleship is half-hearted and we fail to respond to your call. Help us to change our ways and, as we do so, forgive us in Jesus' holy name.

Gracious God, we believe you hear and answer our prayers and have thrown wide your arms with forgiveness. May we respond to your generous love by serving you and our neighbours with warm and caring hearts, so we may glorify you in the name of our Saviour and friend, Jesus Christ. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that Jesus taught us***

**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.**

*The second hymn was written by the well-known writer, Revd. Alan Gaunt, in 2011. Not so well-known is that he was a URC minister and Headmaster at King Edward's in Birmingham, then at Rugby School, at Malvern College and at Winchester College. I am amazed that such a busy man found time to write any hymns! Let us sing hymn number 120, 'We gladly celebrate and praise,'*

**1. We gladly celebrate and praise,**

**The gift so great and good,**

**Through which God's kindness is made known:**

**The gift of motherhood.**

**2. We sing of Mary's mother-love:**

**For she, of all on earth,**

**Received the privilege to bear**

**And bring God's Son to birth.**

**3. We pray that God's own mother-love  
Will hold in gentleness,  
All children who have never known  
A mother's tenderness.**

**4. For mothers, who with broken hearts,  
Are faced with grief and loss,  
We pray the Son of God will give  
Deep comfort from his cross.**

**5. We trust the mother-love of God,  
Who bears, in Mary's boy,  
Our pain and sorrow, to secure  
Our everlasting joy.**

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***We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away. Let us pray.***

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for this beautiful but broken world on which we live. You have created a beautiful, self-sustaining world in which all people should thrive; you have blessed us not only with intelligence but a sense of right and wrong, yet we are confronted by the brokenness and suffering on our planet, often caused by human pride, greed, selfishness, cruelty, foolishness and indifference. We turn to you, asking you to bring healing and wholeness to those who are suffering, for although so many situations lie beyond our power, to you all things are possible. Nevertheless, help us to play what part in making the world a better place.

Lord of Shalom, Prince of Peace, once more we hear about new conflicts between the USA, Israel and Iran, besides border disputes between Pakistan and Afghanistan. We pray for peace in the world, for an end to conflicts in Ukraine, Palestine, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Guide those who have power and influence and for all national leaders to strive for peace by negotiating end to disputes, rather than striking out in anger. Remember in your mercy the victims of warfare, oppression, prejudice and terrorism, bring an end to their suffering and help them to rebuild their lives in security and peace.

Loving Lord, hear our prayer for the poor and powerless here and abroad, and for all who are working for social justice and peace. We pray that relief agencies and charities will receive the resources and support they need to succeed in their missions. Heavenly Father, help us play what part we can to build a society 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.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, we pray for 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 comfort in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are lonely, overworked, anxious or who feel unloved, besides everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns to you for people for whom we are especially concerned.

.....  
Help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy wherever we can, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love and grant them peace.

Holy God, we pray for our Mother Church throughout the world. May she uphold the maternal qualities of compassion, nurturing, patience and generosity that you breathed into her. Bless and unite your Church in Spirit and truth, so our words and actions bear ample witness to the Good News that Jesus brought to the world. As we journey through Lent, help us all to seek and discern what you call us to do and grant us faith to answer your call.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our friends and families. Keep us free from harm and grant us strength to resist temptation to sin. May the Holy Spirit help us share the love you give us in such abundance with all-comers, so we honour you in the sacred name of Christ our Saviour. Amen.

*Our next hymn was written by Fred Kaan, a Dutchman who was appointed Moderator of the West Midlands Province of the United Reform Church in 1978. He occasionally worshipped at St. Phillip's Cathedral, Birmingham. Hymn number 119, 'God of Eve and God of Mary'.*

**1. God of Eve and God of Mary,  
God of love and mother-earth,  
Thank you for the ones who with us  
Shared their life and gave us birth.**

**2. As you came to earth in Jesus,  
So you come to us today;  
You are present in the caring  
That prepares us for life's way.**

**3. Thank you that the Church, our Mother,  
Gives us bread and fills our cup,  
And the comfort of the Spirit  
Warms our hearts and lifts us up.**

**4. Thank you for belonging, shelter,  
Bonds of friendship, ties of blood,  
And for those who have no children,  
Yet are parents under God.**

**5. God of Eve and God of Mary,  
Christ our brother, human Son,  
Spirit, caring like a Mother,  
Take our love and make us one!**

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**Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 2 verses 1 to 7 and 22 to 35**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"),

and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons". Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

The child's father and mother marvelled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Amen.

*We continue with Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith's version of the Magnificat, inspired by the 1961 "New English Bible". Number 186, 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!'*

**1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!**

**Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;**

**Tender to me the promise of his word;**

**In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.**

**2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!**

**Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;**

**His mercy sure, from age to age the same;**

**His holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.**

**3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!**

**Powers and dominions lay their glory by;**

**Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,**

**The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.**

**4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!**

**Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.**

**Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord**

**To children's children and for evermore!**

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**Address:**

When God sent Jesus to serve all people and to be our Saviour, he chose a young woman, Mary, who wasn't married when she was informed that she'd bear God's Son. In spite of certain scandal and probable danger – a betrothed yet unmarried woman could be stoned to death if she was suspected of adultery – Mary obeyed God's wishes, even though the responsibility of raising any child, let alone Jesus, must have been frightening for so young a woman. The Magnificat, Mary's hymn of praise, shows her faithful response to God's call, rather than her rejection of the angel's words. Clearly, she was willing to bear any burden to serve the Lord, but when she and Joseph went to the temple in Jerusalem for the ritual purification and presentation ceremonies required for their firstborn, they encountered a devout man who had been waiting for the Messiah and who had been led to them by the Holy Spirit. The man, Simeon, said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

For more than thirty years Mary must have suffered greatly, waiting for Simeon’s prophecy to be fulfilled. On Good Friday we shall remember when her worst fears were realized, as Mary, her friends and young John stood at foot of the cross on which Jesus hung, dying in agony. It is hard enough when a child dies before his or her parent, but Mary’s son was dying as a criminal in the cruelest way Romans could devise. For Jews, it was even worse, for Jesus died under the Deuteronomic curse, “**Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.**” Think for a moment: Mary’s son died accursed for our sins.

Imagine Mary’s feelings: her agony as she saw her beloved son die; self-criticism as she wondered whether or not she could have done anything to stop Jesus’ ministry; a terrible sense of failure, as Simeon’s words seemed to make her motherhood crumble to dust, for Mary, like the disciples, had no understanding of the significance of Jesus’ death until after that first Easter. All she would have seen was failure at Calvary, not victory over the power of Satan.

Yet, despite his incredible personal suffering, When Jesus saw that small group beneath his cross, he only thought of his mother’s welfare, so he entrusted her to John, directing him to look after her as own mother and telling Mary to take John as her son in his place. The compassion shown by Christ is breath-taking: there’s no self-pity, nor doubt; Jesus put his mother in the care of the disciple he loved and trusted, showing God’s love isn’t sentimental but practical.

Mary showed sacrificial, maternal love, covered by the Hebrew word, ‘**racham**’; love that comes from the very depths of our soul, love which trusts God enough to put itself at his disposal, come what may. However, we see even an even greater form of love from God himself – **agape** – love that is boundless, unmerited and free. God sent his Son to live among us, with neither status, nor wealth to isolate himself. Jesus came as the Perfect Sacrifice which atones for the sins of the world, but the story doesn’t end there. He was raised, so we have eternal life as a gift of grace, not something we can either earn or deserve. Moreover, after his ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon his followers and the Church – **Mother Church** was born at Pentecost. I marvel at God’s amazing love!

**We are challenged on Mothering Sunday to reflect upon the nature of maternal love and upon the love Mother Church was commissioned to offer all-comers.** We’re called to be as faithful and caring as Hannah and Mary, to trust in God and to do his will in response to his grace – even if our service causes us grief at times. Think of the pain, physical and spiritual, that Jesus bore for our sakes, yet almost with his dying breath he made provision for his mother. Any pains or trials we face in our discipleship will pale into insignificance compared with Christ’s suffering for sinful humanity. May our lives and service reflect the exemplary qualities of mothers in today’s readings and may our church, Mother Church, prove as steadfast as they were in witnessing to God’s amazing love for all. **May each of our lives let the Good News brought by our Saviour shine out into our sin-darkened world – as beacons to draw others to know, love and follow Christ Jesus. Amen.**

*Our closing hymn was written by Jan Struther, the nom de plume of Janet Anstruther. She was an acclaimed author whose best-known novel was made into the splendid wartime film, “Mrs. Miniver”, starring Greer Garson and Walter Pidgeon. We shall sing number 526, ‘Lord of all hopefulness’.*

1. Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,  
Whose trust, ever childlike, no cares could destroy,  
Be there at our waking, and give us, we pray,  
Your bliss in our hearts, Lord, at the break of the day.

2. Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith.  
Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe,  
Be there at our labours, and give us, we pray,  
Your strength in our hearts, Lord, at the noon of the day.

3. Lord of all kindness, Lord of all grace,  
Your hands swift to welcome, your arms to embrace,  
Be there at our homing, and give us, we pray,  
Your love in our hearts, Lord, at the eve of the day.

4. Lord of all gentleness, Lord of all calm,  
Whose voice is contentment, whose presence is balm,  
Be there at our sleeping, and give us, we pray,  
Your peace in our hearts, Lord, at the end of the day.

© *Jan Struther {1901 - 1953}*

***Benediction***

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.