

A service for 16th January, 2022 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 36 verses 5 to 9

Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep. O LORD, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love! Both high and low among people find refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Bernadette Farrell, a social activist from West Yorkshire and one of the best contemporary hymn-writers. Although she is a Roman Catholic, her hymns are as ecumenical in nature as they are profound. This hymn seems particularly apt in these time of pandemic and uncertainty. 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

Almighty God, we come to worship you as we face an uncertain future, this New Year. Let us remember that you are always by our side, even in the darkest of times, just as we recall that your son, Jesus, left the treasures of heaven to grow up among people like us, sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations, yet doing so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. He is Emmanuel, God with us and within us. We believe his death and resurrection broke the hold of sin and death over us and we have eternal life through faith in him.

Amazing heavenly Father, may we pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, for you are the Lord of all and our Saviour. We offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship this afternoon, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord.

Heavenly Father, we offer thanks for the many blessings we receive from you, day by day: for the many good things we enjoy; for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care, but most of all that you love us even at our worst, when we are loveless and unlovable.

Merciful Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and for times when we see neighbours in need or distress but don't help them. Forgive us, too, for our failure commit ourselves to you and to serve you whole-heartedly. Help us to change our ways, so that our lives become Christ-centred, not self-centred.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught 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.

Christ Jesus came as God's light and our next hymn, written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to guide us in our lives. We shall sing hymn number 346, 'Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other,'

**1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;
No one can serve him and despise another.
Who else unites us, one in God the Father?
Glory to God on high.**

**3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;
Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –
He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:
Glory to God on high.**

**4. Give God the glory, God and none other;
Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;
Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:
Glory to God on high.**

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Sovereign God, at a time when most of the world is rejoicing at Christ's birth and the start of a New Year, we are aware of the brokenness of this beautiful, yet fragile world.

As we remember how our Saviour came into the world, homeless and in need, we pray for the poor, disfranchised and marginalised in the world, particularly people from the Developing world whose lives are often brutal, bitter and short. Loving heavenly Father, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all, by campaigning to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting and even celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to divide us.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who are facing undue pressures in these troubled times: those who have been deeply affected by coronavirus: others who are suffering from long COVID19, or who have lost loved-ones because of it; others who have lost employment, or who are burdened by debt as a result of COVID lockdowns or restrictions; neighbours who are lonely and afraid, or who feel abandoned; people whose relationships have broken down; children whose lives have been constricted and whose education has been damaged; everybody whose spiritual and mental health has been severely challenged during the past two years.

As Jesus came as Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Help them find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them and for whom the pandemic has been a living nightmare. Comfort them in their distress and ease their brokenness, Lord.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them: Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but embrace everybody for whom we pray with your love, so they receive healing, courage, comfort and peace.

Heavenly Father, Jesus came as Prince of Peace, but his parents were forced to flee to Egypt to avoid Herod's wrath, so in his infancy he experienced what it is to be a refugee, so it is natural, therefore, to pray for the victims of wars, terrorism, prejudice and persecution, for you understand their plight. Teach leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force. Inspire them to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace prevail.

Hear our prayer for the victims of war and terrorism: those who have lost loved ones; for people who have suffered life-changing injuries to body, mind or spirit and for refugees, who have not only been driven far from their homes, but who face exploitation and danger in order to find security and a new beginning. Compassionate God, may they all receive the support and encouragement required to rebuild their broken lives. Remember in your mercy people in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan where strife is threatening to result in catastrophic famine in these countries.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our Circuit and for the World Church as we begin to emerge from the shadow of the pandemic. Help us learn to find new, effective ways to serve our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by proclaiming Good News with one voice and serving him with united hearts.

Lord, we ask you to bless people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: workers in the NHS, carers, scientists who are producing anti-COVID vaccines and medicines, besides key-workers throughout the country. May they remain successful and safe in their work, Lord.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. Keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways throughout this year, so we may bear the light of the gospel message into the darkest corners of your kingdom, in the glorious name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Gospel reading is John chapter 2 verses 1 to 11

On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him,

"They have no more wine."

"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My time has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants,

"Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants,

"Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said,

"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Horatius Bonar, who lived in Edinburgh all his life and was ordained into the Church of Scotland in 1837 to become Vicar at Kelso. However, he grew increasingly disenchanted by the 'straight-jacket' of the established church, so he joined the Free Church of Scotland in 1843. Life in the Free Church provided greater scope for Rev. Bonar to write evangelistic hymns and sermons. In later life, Rev. Bonar became the Minister of Chalmers Memorial Church in Edinburgh and, six years before he died, he was appointed Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. Hymn number 248, 'I heard the voice of Jesus say'.

**1. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Come unto me and rest;
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down
Thy head upon my breast.'**

**I came to Jesus as I was,
So weary, worn and sad;
I found in him a resting-place,
And he has made me glad.**

**2. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold, I freely give
The living water, thirsty one;
Stoop down and drink and live.'**

**I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, / And now I live in him.**

3. I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'I am this dark world's light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise,
And all thy day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus and I found
In him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk
Till trav'ling days are done.

© Horatius Bonar (1808 – 1889)

Sermon: *'There he showed his glory, and his followers believed in him.'* John 2:11

When our daughter, Hannah, married twelve years ago, Carol and I enjoyed the day's proceedings, and were very proud parents – but we were glad when we arrived home at about half past ten that night, for it had been an exhausting experience, though the only thing that went wrong was when the bridal car broke down on the box junction by Brierley Hill Road on the way to the reception! However, in Jesus' time Jewish weddings lasted for as long as a week, involving not only the family, but sometimes the whole village. It would be a serious test of the host's and hostess' finances, because everybody would judge them on their hospitality. Had Hannah's reception lasted a whole week, there would have been a retiring collection at the end of my services for several months afterwards! John's account of the wedding at Cana described a potential social catastrophe when the wine ran out. Mary, Jesus' mother, was the first to notice the shortage, so she alerted her son, hoping to prevent their hosts' humiliation and a premature end to the festivities.

However, her observation was met with some reservation by Jesus and our translation, "**Dear woman, why come to me? My time has not yet come**", misses the essence of what Christ was trying to say: essentially, he replied that his mother's concern for earthly happiness was different to his own, heavenly aims. Nevertheless, Mary was confident that he would not let her down, for she told the servants to do what Jesus instructed them to do. John described what followed as a '**sign**' rather than a miracle, because he was less concerned with the nature of what happened than what was symbolised by it.

Jesus told the servants to fill six large jars, or pitchers, with water, but these weren't just ordinary vessels; they were used for ceremonial washing by the guests in order to fulfil the purity laws of the Torah. Commentaries state that each would have held about thirty gallons of water, which gives us a picture of the generous provision of God's grace. Normally, no Jew would dream of drinking water from such containers, yet the Lord not only transformed what his fellow Jews regarded as tainted water into wine, but it was wine of the finest quality – John recorded, '**The master of the wedding called the bridegroom and said to him, "People always serve the best wine first. Later, after the guests have been drinking awhile, they serve the cheaper wine. But you have saved the best wine till now."**'

Please, don't spend time trying to work out how water was transformed into finest wine. Instead, consider Jesus' ministry: he reached out to the marginalized of society, tax-collectors, prostitutes, the sick and leprous – even to Samaritans, who were treated as untouchables by most Jews and by doing so he transformed them. Consider how the woman at Jacob's Well – an outcast forced to draw water at noon because of her lamentable marital record – was restored to her fellow-villagers after she met Jesus. This is the essence of this '**sign**' in John's gospel: Jesus will transform even the base and despised into a blessing for God's kingdom. If we let him, he will do the same in our

life. I know that, as a good Methodist, I should not rejoice in turning water into wine, but as a Methodist who would be good, I certainly hope that Jesus will transform my baseness into something beautiful for God the Father.

Jesus saw the potential of the tainted water in those pitchers, so he changed it into wine, in sufficient quantities to last through the wedding feast. Don't forget that the alcohol sterilised the liquid, making it safer to drink – which is why John Wesley often drank ale on his preaching travels, as water supplies in many Eighteenth Century towns and villages was highly polluted and led to outbreaks of dysentery and cholera. Jesus sees our potential, despite our sinfulness and failings and he died at Calvary to cleanse our souls, so we can share good news with our neighbours and build up his kingdom. Unlike the water in Cana, we aren't purified by alcohol but by the Holy Spirit, who we receive as Christ's gift through faith.

Paul wrote this of the fruits of the Spirit that empowered followers at the first Pentecost and now as well: **'Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines'**.

Each of us has been given gifts by the Holy Spirit and he calls us to use them for the common good. We may be gifted as stewards, or as musicians, pastoral visitors, Sunday School teachers, singers, flower-arrangers, encouragers, organisers, worship leaders or preachers, but if we don't use these gifts we are of little use to the kingdom. Are any of us here like I was when I heard a call to preach? I raised a host of counter arguments – 'imagining the call', 'too busy', 'too many commitments', 'inadequacy' – but Sister Jane Day told me forthrightly that if Jesus wants us, he'll give us all we need. When I answered Christ's call, I received a wonderful blessing (though congregations may choose to disagree) and when I felt called to chaplaincy, I didn't hesitate. If you are being called, to whatever role, or capacity, make yourself available and you will be amazed at what happens.

Christ has transformed us from water into wine, but if that wine remains untasted and unused, of what use is it? **Let each of us rise to Jesus' challenge: answer his call to share what gifts and graces with which he has blessed us, so that our pooled talents help our church to be a blessing and a revelation of the love of God in grateful service of our wonderful Saviour. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in 1968, as his response to the diocese of Blackburn's 'Call to Mission' challenge to write a suitable hymn for its call – and what a response it is! It is a call to share the Good News – a battle cry in an increasingly secular society! Remember, we certainly do have a gospel to proclaim. Hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim.'

- 1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**
- 2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,**

**But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

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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 now and for evermore. Amen.