

A service for 16th July, 2023 (StF)

Call to worship: Isaiah chapter 55 verses 10 to 13

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn-bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD'S renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed.” Amen.

The author of our first hymn, David J. Evans, grew ever more concerned about many new hymns becoming over-familiar towards God, trivialising him and ignoring his holiness, power and glory. As a result, in 1985 he wrote both words and music for hymn number 20, “Be still, for the presence of the Lord,”

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, Word of life throughout the universe, you first revealed yourself to human beings through Law you gave Moses and by the prophets, so we might know, love and serve you, but when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you displayed amazing grace and goodness by taking human form as Jesus Christ and living with us. Jesus not only brought Good News in words and deeds of love which reveal your true nature, but gave his life at Calvary to pay the cost of the sins of the world. Through his resurrection, he broke the power of sin and death and by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit he lives within each of us, encouraging, guiding and empowering us as we seek to serve him.

Thank you, O Lord, for all the good things that we enjoy, for the wide variety of gifts you offer us: for everyone who has brought inspiration, love and joy into our lives and, most of all, for loving us even when we are unloving, faithless and unlovable.

Merciful God, we confess that sometimes we do not appreciate all the blessings you grant us. Sometimes we spurn your gifts because they require us to use them for the well-being of other people, rather than our own prestige or benefit. At other times we abuse your gifts, or simply ignore them because of our laziness, fear, or sense of unworthiness. Often, we let you down because we try to act in our own strength, rather than calling on the Holy Spirit to empower, guide and encourage us. O Lord, in Jesus' lovely name help us amend our ways and pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers, so we are confident that you have forgiven us and call us to serve you. From now on, let the Holy Spirit rule our words and deeds, so we live as you desire us to and use our gifts of the Spirit for the good of the Church and our neighbours, in Jesus' holy name. 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.

We shall sing a hymn written in the middle of the Nineteenth Century by Love Maria Willis, the Unitarian wife of a doctor in New Hampshire, USA. It was revised and first appeared in English hymnals at the start of the Twentieth Century. It is an honest hymn which acknowledges that discipleship can be challenging, but with God's grace, we can fulfil our calling. Hymn number 518, 'Father, hear the prayer we offer.'

1. Father, hear the prayer we offer:

**Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.**

2. Not for ever in green pastures

**Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.**

3. Not for ever by still waters

**Would we idly rest and stay;
But would strike the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.**

4. Be our strength in hours of weakness,

**In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be there at our side.**

© Love Maria Willis {1824 – 1908}

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns to the Lord for people nearby and far afield.

Creator God, we praise and thank you for this beautiful, self-sustaining world, but we are only too well aware of its brokenness, some of which is caused by natural disasters, but much of which is the result of mankind's failure to recognize and honour kingdom values such as justice and loving-kindness. Lord, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can to help our neighbours, nearby and far from us. Where the best we can offer in our service is inadequate, then we ask you to warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the countries afflicted by droughts and famine, especially Sudan and Afghanistan where civil war and disputes with the United Nations are making it even more difficult to feed the starving masses. May your loving-kindness break down stubborn pride and warm cold hearts to offer hope

to these lands and may grain and oil still be allowed to be carried from Ukrainian ports to ease their plight.

Lord of compassion, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can, or Christian Aid as they support victims of disasters.

Gracious God, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that justice prevails and people desire fairness for all-comers. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we see others as you see them, as your children who are to be protected and nurtured. Help us to be willing to work together in mutual trust, to always seek the common good, rather than our own selfish desires and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

We pray for the establishment of peace in the many lands blighted by conflict around the world, including Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace among Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. May our daily lives reflect the peace we ask for the world in the way we care for our neighbours.

Lord of wholeness and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: for all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. Lord, remember neighbours who are lonely, anxious, overworked, or who feel undervalued and unloved as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....
Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and peace.

Holy God, grant that this church and churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we represent the glory of shalom, offering harmony, wellbeing, prosperity, security, reconciliation, love and the kind of peace which passes understanding, offering your full blessing to all-comers. May we bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus' name.

Abba, heavenly Father, look upon us, our friends and families with loving-kindness. In the power of the Holy Spirit, keep us safe, help us resist the temptation to sin, and, most of all help us to live out the gospel message in all that we do and say, so our lives honour your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 13 verses 1 to 9 and 18 to 23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered round him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying:

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good

soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown." Amen.

Our next hymn was written by a retired Methodist minister, Revd. Fred Pratt Green, who was born in 1903 and died in 2000. It is set to 'Ar hyd y nos', or 'All through the night'. Hymn number 124, 'For the fruits of all creation,'

**1. For the fruits of his creation,
Thanks be to God;
For his gifts to every nation,
Thanks be to God;
For the ploughing, sowing, reaping,
Silent growth while we are sleeping,
Future needs in earth's safe-keeping,
Thanks be to God.**

**2. In the just reward of labour,
God's will is done;
In the help we give our neighbour,
God's will is done;
In our world-wide task of caring
For the hungry and despairing,
In the harvests we are sharing,
God's will is done.**

**3. For the harvests of the Spirit,
Thanks be to God;
For the good we all inherit,
Thanks be to God;
For the wonders that astound us,
For the truths that still confound us,
Most of all, that love has found us,
Thanks be to God.**

© Fred Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

Sermon: "Those who have ears, let them hear." Matthew 13:9

In the years before I retired from teaching twenty years ago, July was the time that I reviewed my own performance and those of my pupils during the year. This was especially true of my eleventh year cohort, for their GCSE results would be published four weeks into the holiday and much depended upon their success or failure. I was often given more challenging groups, as I was regarded either as a disciplinarian, or simply expendable! Consequently, I can empathise with Jesus' teaching about the sower and the seed.

I am sad to report that some of my former pupils had long since been switched off education, so however hard I tried to motivate, cajole or bluster them into doing enough work to pass, my efforts were doomed to failure. They'd sit sullenly chewing their pen – rather more usually my pen, as they seldom appeared with one – until the bell rang, whence they would depart, leaving behind scant evidence of any brain activity. They were my seeds on the path!

Others arrived with every intention of working hard, seeking my approval. However, they were easily distracted, having the concentration span slightly superior to a goldfish and they would sit through detailed preparation work and clear instructions of the task in hand only to ask sheepishly, "What do I have to do?" as I started them off on the exercise. My seeds on rocky places!

A third group was brighter than the second and more highly-motivated than the first, but they were afraid of being called 'swats', so they would join forces with the more disruptive elements – even though they knew the consequences – to avoid any chances of being bullied as 'teacher's pets'. This group grieved me most deeply, for few of them could be saved from themselves and so never reached their potential. They, of course, were the wheat choked by the weeds.

Fortunately for my sanity, even the worst classes had a few pupils, who had the character to resist apathy, confusion and peer-pressure, who tried their hardest and sometimes even exceeded their own expectations. I still treasure the day my father told me how one of his cricketing friends whose son succeeded in gaining a pass, despite considerable learning difficulties, had danced around the kitchen, accompanied by his wife, when David received his results. Such a harvest of success still makes teaching a worthwhile career, even though it may not have impressed an Ofsted inspector!

Of course Jesus wasn't referring to academic matters: he was telling his disciples, as future sowers of the seeds of Good News, that they must not expect everybody to accept it and live it out. There are those who will have closed hearts and minds, who will reject the Gospel message from the outset; others will accept the teaching superficially, but when friends mock them, or challenge their beliefs, or if the authorities persecute them for their faith, they will fall away, despite all efforts to keep them on board; the third kind of people are they who have all the potential of becoming good Christians, but find pressures of family, or wealth, or work, or temptations to avoid being considered 'religious' by others too hard to resist, so they fail to reach their potential, even though they retain residual faith.

The fruitful remnant is people who receive spiritual nourishment, through worship, Bible-study and fellowship. They not only receive the word, but live out Christ's teachings, refusing to let anything crowd Christ out of their lives. Such people are not **stereotypical 'Holy Joes' or 'do-gooders'**, as so often portrayed on television, though we should always try to do good. No, they fall into the category described by St. Paul as, **'those who live in accordance with the Spirit,'** for they **'have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.'**

Jesus clearly recognised the conflict within our human nature between the material and spiritual way of life, the former leading to rejection of God's values, the Spirit-led path offering new life in Christ with the resulting peace – shalom in Hebrew. Shalom means more than peace: it covers harmony, unity, rest and prospering. Jesus offers us this peace in his Gospel message, which challenges selfishness and the **'me first'** attitude which seems to pervade society today. Christ's values – Spiritual values – are based on love – of God and neighbour, not of wealth and possessions. As such they are life's solid joys and lasting treasures.

John Fawcett was appointed Pastor at a Baptist church in Wainsgate, Yorkshire, where the small, impoverished congregation could not even afford to pay his keep, other than in kind, potatoes, rabbits and wool being much of their contribution. In 1772, Revd. Fawcett wrote an essay about anger that came to the attention of the King and so impressed him that he wanted to advance his career. The King offered John Fawcett the position as Minister at the huge, prosperous Carters Lane Church in London.

John Fawcett accepted the move, but after he preached his farewell sermon, he returned to his house where carters were loading his possessions. He decided to go round to his small flock to say his farewells in person. Although they were poor and illiterate, he began to recall the times they had shared. All of the members were desperately sad to lose him, so it is not surprising that long before he had finished his visits, John Fawcett was waging an inner battle between his worldly desire to answer the King's call to go to London and enjoy a life of riches and what he felt was a call by God to remain at Wainsgate, serving the people whom he loved – though at great cost in material terms.

After a time of contemplation, Revd. Fawcett returned to his house and instructed the removal men to unload his belongings, declaring that he would remain in Wainsgate a little longer. In fact, he remained there the remaining fifty-four years of his life, during which time he wrote the lovely hymn, "Blest be the tie that binds" which recognises the beauty of Christian fellowship, where the very love of Jesus is reflected in mutual prayer and service. Although Revd. John Fawcett was neither wealthy nor famous in worldly terms, he was rich in love, for he lived in the Spirit and is an example of the fertile soil in which Christ wants the Gospel seeds to grow. May our lives show that we are fertile soil, too. Amen.

We close our worship with another hymn by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, entitled "The Caring Church". Hymn number 415, 'The Church of Christ in every age'.

- 1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.**
- 2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.**
- 3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.**
- 4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.**
- 5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.**

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.