

A service for Ascensiontide – 16th May, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3

Blessed are people who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers. Amen.

We shall bring our praise to Jesus with a hymn written in 1987 by Noel and Tricia Richards. Hymn number 293, 'All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;'

**1. All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord;
Who can compare with the beauty of the Lord?
For ever he will be the Lamb upon the throne:
I gladly bow the knee and worship him alone.**

**2. I will proclaim the glory of the risen Lord,
Who once was slain to reconcile us to God.
For ever you will be the Lamb upon the throne:
I gladly bow the knee and worship you alone.**

© Noel Richards (born 1955) & Trish Richards (born 1960)

In our opening prayer, when I say, 'Amazing God', please respond with, 'All honour and glory are yours'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you reconciled sinners like us to you and broke the power of death.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you brought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and atoning for the sins of the world.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Blessed Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide in our discipleship, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into us.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. Hear and accept our praise. **Amen.**

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond with, 'Restore us to righteousness'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for all the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for everyone who guides, loves and inspires us, but most of all for your undying love. Forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving and judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Merciful Lord' 'restore us to righteousness'.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-ignite the embers of our faith, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here.

'Merciful Lord' 'restore us to righteousness'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful 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.

Thomas Kelly was ordained into the Church of Ireland in 1792. He became well known as a preacher but the Archbishop of Dublin prohibited him from preaching in the diocese because of the evangelical emphasis of his message. As a result, Kelly left the Church of Ireland and preached as an independent minister in two unconsecrated buildings in Dublin. Those who followed him were known as 'The Kellyites'. His life has echoes of the brothers John and Charles Wesley. Like John, he also formed congregations in other towns, became active in many good causes, and was particularly esteemed by the poor; like Charles, he was a prolific hymn writer. Hymn number 312, 'The head that once was crowned with thorns'

**1. The head that once was crowned with thorns,
Is crowned with glory now;
A royal diadem adorns
The mighty Victor's brow.**

**2. The highest place that heaven affords
Is his, is his by right,
The King of kings, and Lord of lords,
And heaven's eternal light,**

**3. The joy of all who dwell above,
The joy all below
To whom he manifests his love,
And grants his name to know.**

**4. To them the cross, with all its shame,
With all its grace, is given,
Their name an everlasting name,
Their joy the joy of heaven.**

**5. They suffer with their Lord below,
They reign with him above,
Their profit and their joy to know
The mystery of his love.**

**6. The cross he bore is life and health,
Though shame and death to him;
His people's hope, his people's wealth;
Their everlasting theme.**

© Thomas Kelly {1769 – 1855}

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say, 'Lord in your mercy', please respond, 'Empower us with your Spirit'.

Loving God, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify the results of mankind's cruelty, folly, exploitation and indifference which result in so much suffering around the world.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

We pray for all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission. May we bear the gospel light to this suffering and sin-darkened world. Bring us safely through this pandemic and renew our calling.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

Lord, as we reflect upon our world and the serious issues our environment faces, we ask you to inspire and guide those who are striving to keeping earth habitable for future generations. We pray for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to impoverished countries India and Brazil, where many people are suffering with and dying from coronavirus and where the health systems cannot cope. May countries that can offer support do so swiftly, to bring the situation under control.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

Lord, we remember before you people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia and also their families, friends and carers whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Grant all of them the support and hope they need to keep going.

We pray for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love, so they may find comfort, healing, courage and enduring peace.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

Gracious Lord, inspire and guide the leaders of nations and opposition groups in the way of peace. Teach them to eschew the use of violence to achieve their aims: instead may they seek to follow the way of justice, mercy and peace. Teach us also to act justly and to care for our neighbours, especially people whom we find it difficult to like.

Yesterday was International Conscientious Objectors' Day. This was a day to remember women and men who historically refused and in many parts of the world still refuse to join armed forces. Since 1916 many Methodist ministers and members were conscientious objectors. This led to the founding of the Methodist Peace Fellowship which at one time counted half of all British Methodist ministers as members. We offer our prayer for those who have suffered for their deeply-held beliefs.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

We ask you to bless those who are striving for our wellbeing, especially members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers, as they try to bring us through this time of trial and anguish. Keep them safe and grant them success in their endeavours.

'Lord in your mercy' **'Empower us with your Spirit'**.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers, in the name of our risen Lord Jesus, to whom be glory and honour for evermore. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1739. It originally had eleven verses – that's forty-four 'alleluias'! Hymn number 298, 'Christ the Lord is risen today;'

- 1. Christ the Lord is risen today; *Alleluia!***
All creation joins to say; *Alleluia!*
Raise your joys and triumphs high; *Alleluia!*
Sing, you heavens, let earth, reply; *Alleluia!*
- 2. Love's redeeming work is done, *Alleluia!***
Fought the fight, the battle won; *Alleluia!*
Vain the stone, the watch, the seal; *Alleluia!*
Christ has burst the gates of hell; *Alleluia!*
- 3. Lives again our glorious King, *Alleluia!***
Where, O death, is now your sting? *Alleluia!*
Once he died our souls to save; *Alleluia!*
Where's your victory, boasting grave? *Alleluia!*
- 4. Soar we now where Christ has led, *Alleluia!***
Following our exalted Head; *Alleluia!*
Made like him, like him we rise; *Alleluia!*
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies: *Alleluia!*
- 5. King of Glory! Soul of bliss! *Alleluia!***
Everlasting life is this, *Alleluia!*
You to know, your power to prove, *Alleluia!*
Thus to sing, and thus to love: *Alleluia!*

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Our reading is Acts Ch. 1 vs. 15 – 17 & 21 – 26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said,

"Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus— he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed,

"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. Amen.

Sermon: waiting

Last Thursday was Ascension Day and today's reading from Acts deals with some of the events between Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Luke's gospel ended with Christ ascending to heaven, with his followers worshipping him and returning from Bethany to Jerusalem 'with great joy'. In the beginning of Acts, they

stood, staring heavenwards until prompted to move by two figures clad in white. They had been told to stay in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit, but they were not certain when this would be. They were joyful because they recognised in the ascension that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and he had fulfilled his mission to reconcile the human race to his Father, so he could resume his rightful place at God's right hand.

The eleven disciples, Mary, mother of Jesus, the women who'd faithfully followed Jesus and a large group of followers, one hundred and twenty in all, were staying in a room in Jerusalem, not only because the risen Lord had told them to wait there for the Holy Spirit, but because it was almost Shavuot – Pentecost is a Greek word – when Jews celebrate Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. Jews from the Diaspora would have flocked to Jerusalem to worship in the temple and to give first-fruit offerings at the end of the barley-growing season. The coming of the Spirit at Shavuot / Pentecost would be of great significance, for in the new Covenant, salvation would not be gained through Law, but through faith in Jesus as our Saviour. Justification comes through Christ, not by animal sacrifices, for Jesus became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Just before this reading, the disciples, male and female, prayed together, often 'with a single purpose in mind'. In Luke, they were said to have been constantly worshipping in the temple, but in that case the sexes would have been separated. Here, we have a united community of believers, praying together, sharing fellowship and waiting with conflicting feelings of expectation and dread. They were excited by Jesus' command to take Good News to the world, but felt totally inadequate to fulfil their commission. Peter declared that the time had come to find somebody to replace Judas Iscariot, not because of superstition, because of the significance of twelve in Hebrew culture. Twelve represents the sons and tribes of Israel – God's chosen people'; twelve apostles are therefore needed to build a new chosen people.

Notice how Peter stipulated that the person to replace Judas must have been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry to his ascension. In other words, he must have shared the whole ministry, so he would know the whole story and witness to it. Some commentators dislike the idea of lots to determine which of Joseph or Matthias should be chosen, but remember, they prayed for the Lord to guide them. Therefore, the use of lots left the decision in God's, not human, hands. Having chosen the twelfth man, they continued in fellowship and prayer until the Spirit came to them. However, we can save that for next week's sermon.

Where does the passage from Acts leave us? We have effectively spent fifteen months locked away because of COVID19. Like the disciples, we have experienced fear of family, friends or us coming to harm. We have had time to reflect on our lives and relationships, including our relationship with God. Many if not most of us will be joyful as Government restrictions come to an end, but that joy may be tinged with apprehension for the future. The disciples were also very apprehensive, so much so that the door of their room was bolted. They were painfully aware of their inadequacy to act in their own strength, yet they were joyful, too, because they knew of Christ's redeeming grace and power and had been promised his gift of the Holy Spirit so they could accomplish the Great Commission.

I hope we also know of Jesus' redemptive love and the capacity of the Spirit to guide and empower us, for the Great Commission is ours today. Many of our churches have been active during the pandemic, but lockdown has provided opportunities for us to reflect upon what should happen as we return to a new normality. What changes do we need to make in worship and outreach? What practices are unproductive and ought

to be abandoned? What needs have we become aware of during coronavirus and how can we as a church, or as THE CHURCH, serve those needs? Our duty to take Good News to a bruised world is unchanged, but the way we carry it out – and our targets – may need to change. As we begin to open our churches again, let us rejoice in fellowship, praise God and engage in prayerful, honest discussion, offering a Spirit-led response to our Saviour's call. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Norman Wallwork, a Methodist minister. I presume he has sat down by now, as he is a year older than me and I am rather ancient! If you don't recognize the words, I'm sure you will know its setting, 'Morning light', used for 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus'. Hymn number 315, 'We sing the praise of Jesus'

**1. We sing the praise of Jesus,
Of our ascending Lord;
The triumph of our Saviour,
Of Christ the Son of God.
The forty days are over,
Earth sees his face no more;
But Christ the King of glory
We worship and adore.**

**2. Rejoicing in God's promise
We wait in prayer and praise,
The Spirit sent from heaven
To set the earth ablaze;
We pray with expectation,
We praise with one accord,
We wait for living fire,
The power of the Lord.**

**3. Therefore, with saints and angels
And all the hosts above
We lift our hearts and voices
To bless the God of love;
To sing of our Redeemer
Who intercedes and prays,
That God the Holy Spirit
May guide us all our days.**

**4. With songs of alleluia
Let earth and heaven ring;
And praises to the Father
Let all creation sing.
All honour be to Jesus,
God's own eternal Son;
And to the Holy Spirit
Let endless praise be done!**

© Norman Wallwork (born 1946)

Benediction

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