

A Service for 16th October, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 121 (a Song for going up to worship)

I look up to the hills, but where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not let you be defeated. He who guards you never sleeps. He who guards Israel never rests or sleeps. The LORD guards you.

The LORD is the shade that protects you from the sun. The sun cannot hurt you during the day, and the moon cannot hurt you at night. The LORD will protect you from all dangers; he will guard your life. The LORD will guard you as you come and go, both now and forever. Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn set to 'Abbots Leigh', but "Singing the Faith" uses Henry Smart's 'Bethany'. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'.

**1. God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.**

**Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of the Spirit
Into open minds and hearts.**

**2. Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.**

**3. Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold:
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore.**

**4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe!**

Let us pray.

Word of life, you brought our universe into being and sustain it with your love. Your glory is revealed both in the vastness of space with its myriad suns, planets and moons, besides the beauty and complexity of life on this planet. In the light of your wisdom, might and holiness, we are amazed that you care for flawed human beings so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, revealing your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Amazing God, take away all anxieties and distractions so we can pray to you in faith, sing our hymns of praise joyfully and both understand and respond to your holy word. All honour and glory, power and praise be yours now and forevermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond, 'Forgive and restore us'. Let us pray.

Lord, our Good Shepherd, you bless us day by day with good things to enjoy, with opportunities and experiences that warm our heart. You bring us safely through trials and temptations and you guide and protect us. You are truly amazing and we rejoice to be part of your flock.

However, like sheep we confess that we have strayed from the path you want us to follow: we ignore your calls and go our own way. We are often selfish and self-centred, ignoring the needs of our neighbours; we give way to anger and prejudice, saying things that hurt and offend other people. As we reflect on these things

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Like sheep, we find ourselves in barren places because of our pride and greed. We take more than we need and will not share what we don't want. We are loveless and unlovable, lost and ashamed.....

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Loving, faithful God, you hear and answer our prayers. You seek us out and carry us home to the path of righteousness, rejoicing that we can journey with you once more. Help us to centre our lives on Christ and to lead lives of loving service in his precious name. Amen.

We shall say the Lord's Prayer

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.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for the 25th anniversary of the charity Tearfund in 1993 and followed Kendrick's visit to India the previous year.

Hymn number 693, 'Beauty for brokenness,'

**1. Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair,
Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer.
Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace,
Sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!**

**2. Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills,
Work for all people, trade for their skills;
Land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak,
Voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak.**

Chorus:

*God of the poor, friend of the weak,
Give us compassion we pray:
Melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain;
Come, change our love from a spark to a flame.*

**3. Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
Cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share.
Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain. *Chorus:***

**4. Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams
Plundered and poisoned – our future, our dreams.
Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed;
Make us content with the things that we need. *Chorus:***

**5. Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame
Until your justice burns brightly again;
Until the nations learn of your ways,
Seek your salvation and bring you their praise. *Chorus: © Graham Kendrick (born 1950)***

We shall now bring our concerns for other people to the Lord our God. It is based on a hymn by Colin Fergusson. Let us pray.

God of my faith, I offer you my doubt, for life at times seems far too dark for me, and my belief becomes more insecure, when worldly cares produce uncertainty. Lord, you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, but our hearts sink when we see so much suffering around us, much of which is the result of human greed, pride, foolishness and indifference. Where we are able to serve you, use us as your earthly hands. Grant us the compassion, courage, wisdom and steadfastness to be effective, but where we can't bring about the changes the world requires, we ask you to prompt others who have the power, skill and influence to intervene, for all things are possible to you.

God of my hope, I offer you my fear, when I am scared by my anxiety, when all I hear is suffering and woe, in all my shadows you will walk with me. Gracious God, reports of conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem, civil strife in Iran and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia with threats of escalation into nuclear exchanges make us all anxious. As Prince of peace, hear our prayer for an end to wars and strife which mar so many countries around the world. Warm and mould the hearts of the leaders of all nations and guide them in the ways of justice and mercy through which lasting peace can be achieved.

God of my joy, I offer you my grief, when I sink down in sadness or despair. I pray in all my depths to find you there. Generous God, we pray for the victims of floods in Pakistan and of hurricanes in Cuba and Florida, that they may receive speedy help. We remember, too, our neighbours in famine-stricken countries like Afghanistan and especially those in the horn of Africa, as we ask a blessing on organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which are helping the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government and other agencies, including the Church find ways of helping all those who are facing the choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter, besides people on benefits.

God of my love, I offer you my pain, when I'm alone and feel nobody cares, in aching age or in rejected youth, You bear my cross and dry my human tears. Lord of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are ill, or in any kind of need or trouble. Remember, too, neighbours who living with anxiety or depression, or whose relationships have broken down and, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. Help us to support them in whatever way we can, but embrace them all with your love, so they may be healed, comforted, encouraged and blessed with peace.

God of my life, I offer you my dreams, Light in the darkness where I hide from view, Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love, Light in my life and all my life in you. Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. As we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus help us to realise our dreams of reviving our ministries to our communities, of meeting some of our neighbours' needs and offering not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. May we bear the gospel light of hope and joy to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, Bless us, our families and friends. Inspire us to keep Christ at the centre of our lives, so we share the abundance of your love in all we do and say, in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is Genesis chapter 32 verses 22 to 32

During the night Jacob rose and crossed the Jabbok River at the crossing, taking with him his two wives, his two slave girls, and his eleven sons. He sent his family and everything he had across the river. So Jacob was alone, and a man came and wrestled with him until the sun came up. When the man saw he could not defeat Jacob, he struck Jacob's hip and put it out of joint. Then he said to Jacob, "Let me go. The sun is coming up." But Jacob said, "I will let you go if you will bless me." The man said to him, "What is your name?" And he answered, "Jacob." Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob. Your name will now be Israel, because you have wrestled with God and with people, and you have won."

Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But the man said, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed Jacob there.

So Jacob named that place Peniel, saying, "I have seen God face to face, but my life was saved." Then the sun rose as he was leaving that place, and Jacob was limping because of his leg. So even today the people of Israel do not eat the muscle that is on the hip joint of animals, because Jacob was touched there. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 18 verses 1 to 8

Then Jesus used this story to teach his followers that they should always pray and never lose hope.

"In a certain town there was a judge who did not respect God or care about people. In that same town there was a widow who kept coming to this judge, saying, 'Give me my rights against my enemy.' For a while the judge refused to help her. But afterwards, he thought to himself,

'Even though I don't respect God or care about people, I will see that she gets her rights. Otherwise she will continue to bother me until I am worn out.'"

The Lord said,

“Listen to what the unfair judge said. God will always give what is right to his people who cry to him night and day, and he will not be slow to answer them. I tell you, God will help his people quickly. But when the Son of Man comes again, will he find those on earth who believe in him?” Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn by the prolific and long-lived Methodist Minister, Revd. Fred Prat Green. It was written for the Dean and Chapter of Norwich Cathedral to mark the late Queen’s Silver Jubilee in 1977, entitled “A Hymn for the Nation”. Hymn number 705, ‘It is God who holds the nations’.

1. It is God who holds the nations

**In the hollow of his hand;
It is God whose light is shining
In the darkness of the land;
It is God who builds the City
On the Rock and not on sand:
May the living God be praised!**

2. It is God whose purpose summons us

**To use the present hour;
Who recalls us to our senses
When a nation’s life turns sour;
In the discipline of freedom
We shall know God’s saving power:
May the living God be praised!**

3. When a thankful nation, looking back,

**Has cause to celebrate
Those who win our admiration
By their service to the state;
When self-giving is a measure
Of the greatness of the great:
May the living God be praised!**

4. God reminds us every sunrise

**That the world is ours on lease;
For the sake of life tomorrow
May our love for it increase;
May all races live together
share its riches, be at peace:
May the living God be praised!**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Address: “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night?” Luke 18:7

If the Jewish patriarch, Jacob, came into this church today, I would advise the stewards to keep a close watch over any valuables, for he was not the kind of person you could trust – at least until the time he wrestled with God by the river Jabbok. Indeed, Jacob was a flawed man even from his birth: his name **Ya – aqob** means ‘**heel-catcher**’, not only because he was born clutching his elder twin’s heel, but because ‘heel-catcher’ is a Hebrew term for a deceiver, a trickster or con-man! He lived up to that title, making Esau yield his birth-right for a meal, deceiving Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for his elder brother, then meeting his match at the hands of his artful uncle, Laban, for whom he had to work fourteen years in order to win the hand of Rachel. Even then, his knowledge of breeding enabled him to cheat his uncle of a great number of sheep, so it

wasn't only the lambs which went 'baah!' He was always looking for the main chance and, in many ways was a surprising choice for God's blessing.

Our reading is important, for it is the turning point in Jacob's life. He was returning to face his brother, Esau, so uncertain about his likely reception that he had divided his people into two groups, hoping one might survive, if Esau and his men should attack. He re-crossed the ford of the Jabbok where he encountered a figure with whom he wrestled all night. Although the opponent was stronger and had disabled his hip, Jacob refused to let go until he received a blessing, for Jacob had realized that the man he was holding onto was God. The Lord asked his name and told him, **"Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have prevailed."** Notice that the name-change preceded his blessing, for God's shalom was given to the struggler, not to the former cheat. In other words, as Israel, rather than Jacob, his relationship with God and men had been changed completely. God had taken him as he was – and had blessed him.

Another rogue was the judge in Jesus' parable. He neither feared God, nor respected people's opinions, so he probably followed his own inclinations and had no time for the widow and her pleas for justice. In Jesus' time, widows were powerless, having neither wealth with which to bribe the judge, nor anyone to speak up for her. Under normal circumstances, therefore, the unjust judge would have ignored her or sent her away, but this widow was made of stronger character and she persisted in her struggle, just as Jacob had with God. She wore him down, until he relented and judged in her favour. It is worth noting that the Greek used for **'wore him down'** is **hupopiazō**, which **means to irritate unbearably, to buffet, or even strike a blow under the eye, so the widow's pleas were both continuous and powerful.**

The point that Jesus was making is that if even a stony-hearted and unjust judge can be prevailed upon by constant, fervent requests, then how much more likely will the loving and merciful God answer the prayers of his people? If our prayers are not answered swiftly, we should continue to pray, because God will answer them in his own way and in his own time. Jesus' instruction to pray diligently and not lose heart went beyond the contemporary Jewish teaching, which was to **limit the times of prayer to three a day, 'lest they weary God.'**

Jesus' comment, **"When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"** does not mean that, when he comes again, no one will believe. Instead it was a challenge to us, his followers, to remain constant and continue to pray faithfully for all our needs, even if the Second Coming takes longer than we expect. Jesus encouraged his listeners to pray, for God the Father is just and will respond to believers' pleas.

If you ask why we should have faith that our prayers will be answered, consider Jesus. He prayed often to praise God as well as calling on him to heal or help. Jesus never doubted that his prayers would be answered, even when he prayed for Lazarus, four days after he had died. His two most poignant prayers were in the Garden of Gethsemane when he knew that what he wanted was contrary to his Father's will, so he submitted to his fate, and then as he hung on the cross, he prayed for the forgiveness of those who were killing him, instead of calling for retribution. That is grace, unearned, undeserved yet boundless love! He believed that only by dying could mankind be redeemed, yet he willingly paid the price, confident that God would raise him on the third day. Would God have gone through so much to draw us close to him at Calvary if he intended to ignore our prayers? No, God wants a close relationship with us, so that we can experience his real peace.

However, if we want shalom in our world then we must work for **mishpat – justice**, for Christ challenges us – his Twenty-First Century disciples – to be active in our concern for the poor and powerless everywhere, which is what our Methodist forebears were. Rising energy costs and high inflation may make it difficult for us to give as generously as we have previously done, but at least let us give what support we can to foodbanks and local charities that support people who have fallen into fuel and food poverty. Though money may be tight, can we offer practical support to foodbanks, or holiday clubs that provide children who qualify for free school meals with a midday meal during school holidays? – let's keep Marcus Rashford's campaign running. Warm spaces schemes require volunteers to work. Could you spare time to help in any capacity? Dudley Circuit has a 'Holidays at Home' group which tries to reduce social isolation and loneliness. Can we broaden its scope and if so, are any of us willing to contribute to it? Are any of us willing to lobby our MPs to improve social care system in the United Kingdom, because if we don't it is likely to collapse before long? Perhaps we could lobby on behalf of the Developing World via Christian Aid or All We Can?

It would be so easy to throw up our hands in despair when we face these issues, but even if you cannot give what you would like or offer practical support, please pray for the poor and powerless as often as you can, because our prayers can make all the difference. Jesus proclaimed the Great Commandment as, "**Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.**" The second is this: '**Love your neighbour as yourself.**' There is no commandment greater than these." Love is the answer to the world's problems: not wishy-washy, sentimental love, but love with her sleeves rolled up. The most valuable thing we possess is love and God showers that on us in abundance. The more we share the love God gives us, the more we shall receive – like a magic box of chocolates which, unlike mine never runs out! Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by Jacqueline Jones to challenge us. She 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?*

**2. 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:**

**3. 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:**

**4. 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.

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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.