

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 8 to 10

The LORD is good and right; he points sinners to the right way. He shows those who are humble how to do right, and he teaches them his ways. All the LORD'S ways are loving and true for those who follow the demands of his agreement. 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!

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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. We ask you to 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-kindle 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.

We continue our worship as we sing American Baptist minister, Harry Fosdick’s hymn, ‘God of grace and God of glory’, which is set to a lovely Welsh melody, “Rhuddlan”. Hymn number 682, ‘God of grace and God of glory’.

**1. God of grace and God of glory,
On thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient church’s story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour.**

2. Heal thy children’s warring madness;

**Bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul,
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.**

**3. Lo, the hosts of evil round us
Scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;
Free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
For the living of these days.**

© H.E. Fosdick (1878 – 1969)

In our prayers of intercession, we bring our concern for people nearby and far away unto the Lord. Let us pray.

Loving God, although the world in which we live is wonderful and self-sustaining, the news in our Media speaks of its brokenness and is often so gloomy it daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, 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 of all, hear our prayer for the leaders of the nations of the world. Warm and inspire them to govern with mercy and justice. Teach them to negotiate when disputes arise and to compromise in order to avoid warfare. We pray for a just end to fighting in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Syria, Myanmar, Sudan, Somalia and Congo; an end to death, injury, destruction and displacement of our neighbours.

Heavenly Father, remember the victims of global warming, where strong storms, floods, drought and wildfires wreak great destruction. Help all humankind to take greater care of this planet over which we have been made stewards. Let us waste less, recycle more, pollute less and use only the resources we need, so that future generations inherit a healthier planet.

We pray for people who are ill, in body, mind or spirit, for those who are in any kind of need, or neighbours who are lonely or who have lost someone dear. In a time of silence, we name people about whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will understand their need and will reach out to them.

Heavenly Father, may we offer practical support wherever possible to those for whom we pray, but we ask that you will enfold them with your love, offering healing, hope, renewed strength, courage and, not least of all, lasting peace.

Holy God, we offer our prayer for the church, not only here, but the Church throughout the world. Unite us in Spirit, love and truth. Teach us to work together and give us the courage to bring good news to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world which desperately needs it.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 12 verses 49 to 56

“I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed! Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family divided against each other, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

He said to the crowd:

“When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It’s going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It’s going to be hot,’ and it is. Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?” Amen.

Our next hymn by Revd. John Monsell, and is based upon 1 Timothy chapter 6, verse 12 and Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 and 2. The text echoes Paul’s letter to the Ephesians chapter 6, with its call to put on the armour of God – but the enemy we fight is Satan and our defences are faith, truth and love. Anyone who rejects the hymn as a support for war-mongering fails to understand the Church Militant: the Salvation Army use military terminology, but no one, (except post Soviet Russia), could think it is sinister. Indeed, it perhaps the most active of Christian organisations which helps people at their point of need. We shall sing hymn number 634, ‘Fight the good fight with all your might,’

1. Fight the good fight with all your might;

Christ is your strength, and Christ your right;

Lay hold on life, and it shall be

Your joy and crown eternally.

2. Run the straight race through God’s good grace,

Lift up your eyes, and seek his face;

Life with its way before you lies;

Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.

3. Cast care aside; upon your guide

Lean, and his mercy shall provide;

Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove

Christ is its life, and Christ its love.

4. Faint not nor fear, his arm is near;

He changes not, and you are dear;

Only believe, and prove it true

That Christ is all in all to you.

© John Samuel Bewley Monsell {1811 – 1875}

Sermon: *“Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division.”* Luke 12: 51



When we look at Victorian and Edwardian images of Jesus, we are usually confronted by a gentle, European shepherd figure, which fits a common, cosy view of Christ. However, several years ago, an Easter poster depicted our Lord almost as a Che Guevara figure on a red background, with the logo, **‘Meek, mild As if’**. This revolutionary figure was intended to shock, but in fact Jesus is the greatest revolutionary who has ever lived. Unlike Che Guevara, Jesus never harmed anybody, let alone killed anyone, but he was the prime target of the Jewish Establishment, the Sanhedrin, almost as soon as his ministry began.

The thing that frightened the Sanhedrin was the Good News proclaimed by Jesus: the message that God’s kingdom is here and now; that all that sinners have to do to be saved is to turn from their sinful paths back towards God and to have faith in him. Christ offered hope to people marginalized by orthodox Jews as sinners, or unclean, or foreigners – in their opinion condemned, far beyond God’s salvation. God’s grace is available to anybody who calls on him and grace is unconditional, unearned, complete love. In simple terms, God loves us totally, as we are: we can do nothing to make him love us more, or less – so we try to live as well as we can, comforted that when we go astray, he’ll forgive us. We are also secure in the belief that we don’t have to serve him to atone for our sins, but do so as a loving response to his grace. Remember, a volunteer is worth several conscripts, for whatever he or she does is done with a warm heart. Social and racial taboos were to be ended, for Jesus healed and ate with sinners and foreigners. Moreover, followers would no longer need to observe the minutiae of the Torah, the six hundred and thirteen rules that Pharisees laboured to observe every day of their lives in order to earn God’s favour, no longer would sacrifices need to be made as appeasement for sins – for Christ’s sacrifice has paid the ransom for all sins – once and for all.

Our gospel reading begins, **“I have come to bring fire on earth”**, not a destructive fire, but a refining blaze that warms our hearts – **as it strangely warmed John Wesley’s** – and removes the dross of false practice, or unhelpful traditions. Jesus came to turn earthly values on their head. Jesus taught his disciples, **“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,”** and **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven”**. This is a dangerous message of peaceful living, because the world’s attitude seems to be **‘Get your retaliation in first!’**

It is hardly surprising that Jesus warned his followers that whilst our aim is to establish God's shalom – real peace – on earth, the road to peace can bring about suffering and strife, as even family members and friends may reject Jesus' message and turn on those who follow him. (This was especially true of Christians in First Century Jerusalem, who were disowned by families and became destitute, for such was their poverty that several of Paul's letters appeal for sorely-needed aid to the church in Jerusalem).

The inception of God's kingdom of peace can demand suffering and strife for those who work for it, as was the case in 1954, when Martin Luther King became a Baptist pastor in **Montgomery, Alabama**. Black people in that part of the USA were not treated as equals to white citizens: they earned less than half white peoples' wages; they lived apart from whites; many could not vote and they could not use the same restaurants, park benches, or drinking fountains. Even when they travelled by bus, black people could only sit at the back and they had to give up their seat if a white person told them to. Soon after he arrived, a black woman, **Rosa Parks**, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat, but rather than let black people riot, Dr. King organised a black boycott of Montgomery's buses for as long as the company discriminated against black people. Faced by serious loss of business, the bus company changed its policy and Dr. King became leader of the Civil Rights Movement which worked for a peaceful change in the rights of black Americans.

Nevertheless, Martin Luther King became a hate figure for those who did not want any change: his home was bombed; he was stabbed; his family received death-threats, but he steadfastly stuck to his Christian beliefs in the brotherhood of all people in Jesus. At Christmas Eve, 1967, while the USA was heavily involved in the Vietnam War, Dr. King made a speech in which he said, **"Humankind is a child of God, made in his image ... and until men see this everywhere ... we will be fighting wars."** However, he is best-known for the speech, on 28th August, 1963 in which he wrote this extract: **"I have a dream I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the sort of persons they are. I have a dream that, one day all God's children, black, white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the black people's old song, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'"**

As a result of the Civil Rights Movement and its peaceful campaigning, black people were given equal rights to whites and other groups in the USA. Three years later, Martin Luther King was murdered by a sniper at **Memphis**, but his example lives on for all people to strive for change by peaceful means. Christ Jesus challenges us to remain resolute and faithful in our fight for justice and truth, for only if we outface the secularists and scoffers can Christ's Good News warm the hearts of our neighbours. A Christian poster once asked, **'If you were arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?' May the Spirit ensure that all of us can answer 'yes' to that. Amen.**

We close our worship with a hymn by Jacqueline Jones that challenges us. Jacqui 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, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all forevermore. Amen.