

A service for 18th July, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm chapter 25 verses 4 and 5

Teach me your ways, O LORD; make them known to me. Teach me to live according to your truth, for you are my God, who saves me. I always trust in you. Amen.

David Evans wrote our opening hymn as an answer to some of the worship songs of the 1970s and 1980s which were over-familiar to God. He reminds us that God is holy, glorious and powerful – but most importantly that he is here with us now. Let us listen to 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.

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Let us pray

Living God, Word of all life throughout the universe, our Sustainer and Saviour, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and always. We are here to offer our best in worship and adoration, for we see in the beauty of our world your wisdom and creative might. We are astonished that you have honoured us by seeking to draw us close to in a relationship when we may call you “Abba”, ‘Father’.

Despite your Law and the efforts of the prophets, we insisted on going our own way, rebelling against you and turning away from you. However, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you took our flesh and lived amongst us as Christ Jesus. He not only showed us how we ought to live, but died like a common criminal at Calvary to redeem the debt of the sins of the whole world. For our sakes, he broke the hold of Satan and, when he was raised from death, he ensured death does not have the final word by offering us everlasting life. That is truly amazing grace, O Lord! Living God, Word of all life throughout the universe, our Sustainer and Saviour, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and always. Amen.

We come now to our prayer of thanksgiving and confession. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many good things we enjoy; for people who guide, love and inspire us, for many more blessings we receive from you, but most of all for your undying love which we can see in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Jesus. Forgive us when we are unfaithful, self-righteous and judgmental in our dealings with our neighbours.

Lord, we acknowledge that we are slow to answer your call to serve in your name, that we are not as generous with our possessions and our time as we ought to be and that our love for you and our neighbours is often lukewarm. Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our failings; restore us to righteousness, and breathe new life into the embers of our faith.

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have not only pardoned us, but call us to follow you without the burden of our sins. Lord God, teach us to serve our neighbours cheerfully and faithfully, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. 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.

Our second hymn is probably the most widely travelled of all, for it was written in the summer of 1885 in Monstera, Sweden, translated and used first in Germany and then Russia. It was discovered in the early 1930s by a Salvation Army Missionary, Stuart Hine, who adapted and translated it.

At the end of the Second World War Mr. Hine sent a copy to refugees in New Zealand and they sent it to Billy Graham, who could recognise a good hymn. He liked it so much it was sung 99 times at the 1957 Campaign in New York. Hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

**1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed: *Chorus*
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!***

**2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: *Chorus***

**3. And when I think that God his Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin. *Chorus***

**4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration
And there proclaim, my God, how great thou art! *Chorus***

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In our prayers of intercession we remember people near and far away.

Almighty God, knowing that all things are possible for you is a great comfort to us in our discipleship, for although we seek to meet the needs of our neighbours, we are aware how limited our own powers are. Grant us the strength and faith we need to serve Christ's call, yet when the best we can do is not enough, then we pray that you will reach out and inspire people who can heal some of the world's brokenness to act in our stead.

Loving Shepherd, last Sunday was Action for Children Sunday and so we pray for everybody at their headquarters, all those who work for Action for Children, but particularly for the children and families they serve, for the pandemic has made life much more difficult for everyone. May your blessing rest upon them, that they may prosper in all they do, particularly as restrictions are lifted. Warm our hearts, so we may offer what support we can for their great work, whether through prayer or giving.

Holy God, we ask you to revive our church and churches world-wide, particularly when restrictions caused by COVID19 are eased or lifted, so that we may have a blessing to our communities and to people further afield. Help us set aside our divisions and differences, so that we speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him as a united body of believers. Bless and use our love, gifts and graces not only to address the needs of our community, but to share Good News and bring others to know, love and serve Christ.

God of shalom, of peace and harmony, we know of so many parts of the world where wars are being fought and where persecution, sectarianism, prejudice and terrorism blight both individual lives and communities. As we remember the victims of man's inhumanity to man, we ask you to guide the leaders of the nations along the paths of mercy and justice from which peace flows like a holy river. Guide us in all our dealings with our neighbours, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world

Loving Lord, we pray for the success of people who are campaigning against pollution and irresponsible consumerism, so this beautiful planet can remain habitable for future generations to enjoy. Remember, too, our prayer for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to less fortunate countries where there are insufficient supplies.

Heavenly Father, we pray for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit and hold before you in particular those whose treatment has been held up because of the pandemic, besides all whose mental and spiritual health have been adversely affected by lockdown restrictions. May they receive treatment that will restore their health, or at least mitigate the results of neglect and delay. Remember people living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Grant all of them the support and courage they need to persevere in these testing times.

We offer a prayer for people who are in any kind of need or trouble; everyone who is 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.

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Lord, help us to offer them both friendship and practical support, but embrace them with your love, so they may be comforted and healed. Bless them with courage, hope and enduring peace.

We continue to ask your blessing upon everybody who has been working for our wellbeing during this crisis, especially members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers. Bless them, grant them success in their endeavours and keep them safe.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us walk the path of righteousness, sharing the love you give us in such abundance with everybody we meet, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

We continue our worship as we listen to Stuart Townend's version of the 23rd Psalm. Hymn number 481, 'The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;'

1. The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;

**He makes me lie in pastures green,
He leads me by the still, still waters,
His goodness restores my soul. Chorus**

*And I will trust in you alone,
And I will trust in you alone,
For your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

2. He guides my ways in righteousness,

**And he anoints my head with oil;
And my cup – it overflows with joy,
I feast on his pure delights. Chorus**

*And I will trust in you alone,
And I will trust in you alone,
For your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

3. And though I walk the darkest path –

**I will not fear the evil one,
For you are with me, and your rod and staff
Are the comfort I need to know. Chorus**

*And I will trust in you alone,
And I will trust in you alone,
For your endless mercy follows me,
Your goodness will lead me home.*

© Stuart Townend (Born 1963)

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 6 verses 30 to 34 and 53 to 56

The apostles returned and met with Jesus, and told him all they had done and taught. There were so many people coming and going that Jesus and his disciples didn't even have time to eat. So he said to them,

"Let us go off by ourselves to some place where we will be alone and you can rest for a while." So they started out in a boat by themselves for a lonely place.

Many people, however, saw them leave and knew at once who they were; so they went from all the towns and ran ahead by land and arrived at the place ahead of Jesus and his disciples. When Jesus got out of the boat, he saw this large crowd, and his heart was filled with pity for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them many things.

They crossed the lake and came to land at Gennesaret, where they tied up the boat. As they left the boat, people recognized Jesus at once. So they ran throughout the whole region; and wherever they heard he was, they brought to him sick people lying on their mats. And everywhere Jesus went, to villages, towns, or farms, people would take those who were ill to the market places and beg him to let them at least touch the edge of his cloak; and all who touched it were made well. Amen.

Sermon: 'When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd.' Mark 6:34

On several occasions recently, I have been in the middle of an activity, or visit, when my mobile 'phone has rung. As I believed the calls to be important, I stopped what I was doing and answered the calls, only to discover that they were from marketing companies. I always try to be brief but polite in my replies, but I seethe at the interruption to my work. However, interruptions seem to be part of everybody's life today, particularly with the mixed blessings of Media and mobile 'phones. How often have you had a deep conversation ruined by an unexpected caller? Or a special meal interrupted by a 'phone call, or a visit by Jehovah's Witnesses? Today's reading shows how Jesus, too, was often unable to enjoy the privacy he cherished.

The lectionary skirts round the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus walking on water, to consider an ostensibly minor issue: the demands of large crowds when he wanted quality time with his disciples. The events occurred as the twelve returned from their mission to towns and villages in Galilee, soon after the killing of John the Baptist by Herod Antipas. The disciples began to report how their mission had fared, but while Jesus was no doubt keen to listen to their accounts, so many people kept coming to him, for healing and blessing, they couldn't even find time to eat, let alone report back. Whilst Jesus never seemed concerned about his own welfare, he knew how tired and hungry his disciples were after their long tour, so he bade them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."

My commentaries say that the disciples met Jesus at or near Capernaum and they sailed across the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida, not the one on the western shore, but Bethsaida in the Province of Gaulonitis, on the north-eastern side, close to where the River Jordan flows into the sea. That Bethsaida was outside the jurisdiction of Herod, who'd recently killed John the Baptist, and presumably Jesus hoped they would escape the crowds' demands, too. However, some people saw Jesus and his disciples leaving and travelled on foot faster than the fishing boat could cross the waters. Moreover, as they passed through towns and villages in their pursuit of Jesus, the crowds picked up other people, adding to their number. Consequently, Jesus was faced by a multitude as he and his friends landed near Bethsaida. You might have expected him to be frustrated and annoyed, but instead Jesus was filled with compassion – chesed in Hebrew – because he saw them as sheep without a shepherd, so rather than driving them away, he taught them – providing them with the spiritual food they craved.

Later, they sailed for Gennesaret, a fertile, well-populated region on the western shore, but again Jesus was recognised, so wherever he and his disciples travelled, people brought sick friends and relatives for him to heal, going as far as carrying them on mattresses from town to town, hoping to meet him. Clearly, Jesus was in such demand as a healer that he had little to no private time. Incidentally, you may have wondered about the significance of some people's request to let them touch the edge of his cloak, after which they, too, were healed. Jesus' cloak would have been his tallit, or prayer shawl, worn by devout Jews. Along its edges the prayer shawl has tassels, which Jews sometimes use to count prayers. If a Jew touched such a tassel of a healer like Jesus, they considered it to be an unspoken prayer, which is why they were healed without his direct intervention, but through faith.

Although the reading shows Jesus to be in great demand from the public, most who came to him sought physical and mental healing, rather than the deeper understanding of his teaching about the kingdom of God. Whilst we can criticise them for their spiritual blindness, we must ask ourselves whether or not our own daily anxieties and work pressures sometimes reduce our spiritual awareness, too, by crowding Christ out. Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic may have dulled our relationship

with Christ, even though many of us will have had more time on our hands during the past year and a half. Moreover, we may have been too keen to rely on our own resources, rather than Christ's grace, through the difficulties we've encountered, in which case, are we any better than those crowds?

Certainly, our gospel reading has never been more relevant than it is today, when we consider not just our church, but the Church in general. Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs to take Good News to a wider audience – there was no mass Media in those days. He delegated some of his responsibility to them, so they could learn from their experiences and be more capable when, in the power of the Holy Spirit, they fulfilled his commission to take the Gospel message, 'to the ends of the earth'! This accounts for Christ's desire to listen to their reports, for he knew that spreading the faith has to rely on ordinary people going out on his behalf and wanted to know the disciples' strengths and weaknesses as they worked with the power of the Holy Spirit to guide, strengthen and comfort them. Whilst Jesus sees and loves us as individuals, he calls us to pool our talents, gifts and graces to be part of a Church which not only preaches Good News, but lives it out in the way in which it serves the community.

Jesus recognised that he could not do everything on his own, though he is both fully human and fully divine. He commissioned others to serve as his hands, his feet, his voice and we are heirs to that commission. Yet how often do we see churches where leadership is often left to one or two members of a congregation? I know a church where four people effectively ran it for many years. Make no mistake, they were wonderful people, but when their health failed, there was no one to replace them, because the congregation was so blissfully complacent that the quartet would be there indefinitely and because no one really wanted to risk upsetting them by asking if they could help!

All of us need to recognise that individuals can't do everything themselves and Christ Jesus doesn't expect us to, either. We must not work ourselves to death in his service, for he recognises the need our own personal space to relax, reflect and grow. Our ministry is to be part of the body of Christ, being willing to play our part. All Jesus asks is that we do our best in response to his love for us – and to share the task with those around us, including collaborating with other churches as we seek to heal our broken society in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

We close our worship as we sing a hymn written in 1975 by an American Messianic Jew, Rabbi Dr. Stuart Dauermann. He also composed its music. Hymn number 487, 'You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace'.

**You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace,
And the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy and the trees of the field
Shall clap, shall clap their hands;
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
And you'll go out with joy.**

© Stuart Dauermann (born 1944) & Steffi Geiser Rubin

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.