

A service for 18th September, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 113 verses 5 to 9

Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!

We meet at a time of mourning on the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. Our opening hymn reminds us of God's greatness and hymn was written by Pastor Carl Boberg in Monsteras, Sweden in the summer of 1886. It was translated and adapted by a Salvation Army Missionary in Ukraine half a century later, then sent to refugees in New Zealand after the war and forwarded to Billy Graham, who made it one of the most popular of all hymns. 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***

© K. Boberg & Stuart K. Hine / Thank You Music 1953

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, help us feel your presence among us as we come to worship and adore you in time of mourning, for you are the Creator whose wisdom brought all life into being throughout our universe. Your compassion and power sustain life and we know you are gracious, faithful, true, majestic and holy. Your glory is revealed in the vastness of space with its myriad suns, planets and moons, whilst the beauty and complexity of life on this planet fill us with awe. We are amazed all the more that you care for us so much that you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Help us to pray to you in faith, sing our hymns joyfully and both understand and respond to your holy word.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the many blessings we have received from you:

for all the good things that we enjoy, as well as experiences and opportunities that have enriched our lives; for challenges that have tested us and shaped our character. Above all else, thank you for Jesus, whose death and resurrection broke the power of sin and death, and offers us new life at the end of our earthly days.

Merciful God, although Jesus showed us how we should live, we confess that we sometimes say and do things that upset, or hurt other people and grieve you. Moreover, we don't always help those we see in difficulty, or distress when we really know we ought to. Lord, we are truly sorry and turn away from what is wrong, asking your forgiveness in Jesus' name.

God of grace, we believe you have heard and answered our prayer, pardoning us for our sins and calling us to renew our discipleship. Therefore, Lord, fill us with the power of the Holy Spirit, so we may serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully from now onwards, in Jesus' beautiful 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 Oklahoma-born Carol Owens, who, with husband Jimmy, have written many hymns and gospel songs. This one was popular from when it was published in 1972. Hymn number 424, 'God forgave my sin in Jesus' name'.

**1. God forgave my sin in Jesus' name;
I've been born again in Jesus' name,
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share his love as he told me to: *Chorus:***

He said:

*'Freely, freely you have received,
Freely, freely give;
Go in my name and because you believe,
Others will know that I live.'*

**2. All power is given in Jesus' name
In earth and heaven in Jesus' name;
And in Jesus' name I come to you
To share his power as he told me to: *Chorus:***

© Carol Owens {born 1931}

We shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God. Let us stand as we begin with a prayer for our late Queen.

Eternal and everlasting God, we come to you in both grief and thanksgiving for the life and faithful service of our late Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth II which ended last week. We are deeply saddened her reign has come to an end after seventy years' devotion to both our nation and the Commonwealth.

We recall with gratitude how she has been a constant in a world of shifting values, a world that changed profoundly since her reign began in 1952. We recall how she acted

graciously in both good and bad times and was courteous even to world leaders and politicians who considered themselves our country's enemies.

Thank you for empowering her to continue serving to the end of her life because of her love for our Saviour, Jesus. Indeed, thank you for the gifts you gave her, for her love for those she ruled and for all you accomplished in her. Grant her eternal rest, peace and joy at the end of her days on earth.

In your mercy, comfort and strengthen her family and our nation, especially King Charles and Queen Camilla, Princes William and Harry, Princess Anne and Princes Andrew and Edward. May all the formalities and trappings of the State Funeral still allow time for them to grieve her Majesty's death and may King Charles be granted the wisdom and steadfastness to reign as well as did his mother. May we as a nation come together to serve one another faithfully and compassionately in Jesus' name **and may flights of angels sing her to her rest.** Amen.

Please be seated, as we continue our intercessions.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for all you have given us and have done for us. Even though we rejoice in the beauty of nature in late summer and early autumn, we are not blinded to the great suffering which goes on around us, much of which is through human failings and sinfulness, so we bring our concerns to you, asking you to repair some of its brokenness.

Lord, where we are able, enable us to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out to our neighbours in their need or distress. Grant us compassion, courage, steadfastness and empathy when we serve others in Jesus' name, but where the best we can do is not enough, reach out in mercy, for everything is possible for you. May the fullness of your shalom be revealed in our world: peace, harmony, wholeness, prosperity, rest and blessing.

Lord of Peace, we grieve about the number of conflicts around the world, especially at present, conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Bring peace and reconciliation to these countries and guide the leaders of all nations to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, rather than resorting to war. Warm and mould their hearts so they seek justice and mercy in their dealings so that lasting peace can be built on solid foundations.

God our provider, we pray for organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken countries Afghanistan and especially those in the horn of Africa. May the relaxing of the blockade of Ukraine's ports continue to allow the export of much-needed grain and oil to these countries. We offer our prayer for victims of severe flooding in Pakistan, asking that the nation receives much needed help as soon as possible.

We remember, too, 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 help the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government and other agencies find ways of helping all who are finding it difficult to manage.

God of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; or who are in any kind of need or trouble. Hear our prayer for neighbours who living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. Lord, help us to offer them both practical support

and friendship, but enfold them in the warmth of your love which offers comfort, healing, hope, courage and a peace that passes all understanding.

Immanuel, God with us and among us, comfort and strengthen your people as we mourn the loss of our Queen. May your Spirit rest upon King Charles III on his accession that he may reign with as much grace and wisdom as his late mother. In this time of mourning, heal our divisions and help our nation unite to meet the challenges we face with steadfast courage and compassion, so we may be a light to our neighbours.

Holy Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities, at this time of emergence from the dark shadow of Coronavirus. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission so we bear the gospel light to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, Bless us, our families and friends. Inspire us in our discipleship and teach us to reveal the light of your love in all we do and say, in the name of Christ Jesus, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 16 verses 1 to 13

Then Jesus said to the disciples,

“There was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was squandering his property. So he summoned him and said to him, ‘What is this that I hear about you? Give me an accounting of your management, because you cannot be my manager any longer.’

Then the manager said to himself, ‘What will I do, now that my master is taking the position away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg. I have decided what to do so that, when I am dismissed as manager, people may welcome me into their homes.’

So, summoning his master’s debtors one by one, he asked the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ He answered, ‘A hundred jugs of olive oil.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifty.’ Then he asked another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ He replied, ‘A hundred containers of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill and make it eighty.’ And his master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light. And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.

Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” Amen.

We continue our worship with jointly written by Noel Richards and Gerald Coates, who founded Pioneer, a network of churches and groups whose aim is to "develop new churches across the UK and engage in mission globally. Noel Richards was inspired to write hymns and worship songs after he attended a concert at the Colston Hall in Bristol at which twenty-one-year old Graham Kendrick performed. We shall sing hymn number 405, ‘Great is the darkness that covers the earth’.

1. Great is the darkness that covers the earth,
Oppression, injustice and pain
Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,
Though many have come in your name.
Watching while sanity dies,
Touched by the madness and lies. *Chorus:*

*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,
Pour out your spirit we pray.*

*Come Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,
Pour out your spirit on us today.*

2. May now your church rise with power and love,
This glorious gospel proclaim.
In every nation salvation will come
To those who believe in your name.
Help us bring light to this world
That we might speed your return. *Chorus:*

3. Great celebrations on that final day
When out of the heavens you come
Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end
And rulers will bow at your throne.

Our great commission complete,
Then face to face we shall meet. *Chorus: Gerald Coates (b. 1944) & Noel Richards (b. 1955)*

Address: “The Parable of the shrewd Manager.” Luke 16: 1 – 13

Sermon: “No slave can serve two masters;” Luke 16:13

The parable of the unjust steward or dishonest manager is not a commendation of dishonesty, though at first glance it could be taken as such. The steward was often a slave employed by an absentee landlord, almost as a trustee, or financial planner. His task was to manage the estate’s finances with a view to increasing profits. Perhaps the steward was the equivalent of those bankers who sold sub-prime mortgages to high-risk customers, creating the fiscal bubble which burst in 2008 and led to the recession and a **national debt of £1.6 trillion which is still rising**. Well, Jesus’ steward incurred his master’s displeasure and was told to present an account of his dealings after which he would be dismissed. Faced with the prospect of labouring, for which he was unfit, or begging, for which he was too proud, the steward decided upon a course of action that was shrewd, not dishonest dealing.

Although he told his master’s debtors to pay less than they actually owed, he was not really cheating his master, for consumer goods were traded at high interest rates: the steward could have received 100% commission for the olive oil, so by telling the debtor to pay for fifty barrels of oil, the original value was repaid to his master; similarly, the steward forfeited the commission on the wheat, so the debtor actually repaid the real value, not the inflated one. In other words, while the master received no profit, he made no loss and, from the steward’s point of view, he had made a number of friends from the debtors he had let off lightly – and they might offer him employment, or help until he got back on his feet.

In this parable, Jesus was directing his followers to use their possessions wisely, but honestly, so that their wealth would benefit others, who might then follow him. Furthermore, by using their wealth for God's kingdom on earth, they would be welcomed in the eternal kingdom. Some Christians believe that aggressive secularists like Richard Dawkins are our greatest enemy. I beg to differ: materialism is.

We live in a hemisphere where gaining as much wealth and accumulating as many possessions as possible has become many people's prime motivation in life. The cultivation of celebrity, of transient fame through reality television series have led many young people to aspire to such tawdry ambitions, rather than the solid careers that most in their parents' and grandparents' generations sought when they were at school. I am not criticizing youngsters directly, for they face pressures we were never exposed to; moreover, too often, they lack good role-models at home, or in school, in politics, or in the Media. After all, the **current debt on credit cards in the UK is more than £1.4 trillion – about £25000 per person**. Worse still, if we add our **national debt to plastic debts, on average every person in the UK owes more than £50000!** It is little wonder that too many youngsters feel that mundane jobs offer no way forward if they aspire to society's material values, for they depend far too much on wealth and far too little on loving one's neighbour. Is it a coincidence that the decline in church attendance runs almost parallel to the increase in material wealth of our population?

Christ advocated that we should use '**dishonest wealth**' to '**make friends for ourselves**' – in other words, use what God has given us to help people in need, rather than store it up and let it be our master, for if we give all we can to the poor, we not only ease their plight, but demonstrate kingdom value in a most practical way!

The dishonest manager or unjust steward would have been criticized by Christ for exploiting his master's customers by charging high rates of interest, yet when a crisis arose, he abandoned the repayment of interest, so that only the original cost was repaid and his master did not lose by the transaction, though he made no profit. However, his borrowers were relieved of their crippling debts. Currently, the United Kingdom and much of Europe are worrying about the rising cost of living which is serious enough, but our hardship pales into insignificance compared with the plight of the Developing World. Remember, our northern half of the world has ten percent of the world's population, but controls ninety percent of the world's resources. Many Developing nations have been encouraged by the IMF and World Bank to borrow beyond their means and are unable to even repay the interest on their loans, as a result of which they cannot even provide basic services.

Every week more than two hundred thousand children from Developing Nations die as a direct result of poverty: not only because of starvation, but through a lack of clean water, a lack of even rudimentary sanitation and through simple diseases that are easily treated in this country. The Sumatran tsunami killed two hundred thousand people on Boxing Day, 2004 and was headline news in the Media for weeks afterward, yet a similar number of deaths in poor nations on a weekly basis is seldom, if ever, reported.

It is evident that the current high energy and food price rises are going to push many people in this country into poverty this winter. As a church or by working with our Circuit or other churches, we can help to look after our neighbours by supporting food banks, becoming hosts for warm-spaces where the vulnerable can be sheltered, by running holiday clubs to help and feed children on free school meals, who might otherwise go

hungry. Any or all of these initiatives will challenge our resources, but, if you are still unconvinced that we should give as much as we can – in lobbying as well as aid – to support the poor abroad as well, remember this: God gave the most precious thing he possessed to break us free from the chains of sin. His Only Son, Jesus died a most terrible, agonising death for our redemption. What should we offer to break our neighbours free from the chains of poverty? I firmly believe Isaac Watts gives us a clue: **‘Were the whole realm of nature mine, / That were an offering far too small; / Love so amazing, so divine, / Demands my soul, my life, my all!’** May we respond to God’s amazing gift of his beloved Son by giving all we are able, materially, in time and in loving service, in Jesus’ wonderful name. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn written in 1974 by Bryn Rees, a Congregational Minister who served mainly in Eastern and South Eastern England. It has four common settings, which makes it an organist’s nightmare. However, the melody ‘Tetherdown’ was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister. We shall sing hymn number 255, ‘The kingdom of God is justice and joy,’

**1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God’s power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.**

**2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God’s banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair.**

**3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.**

**4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all!**

© Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}

Benediction

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