

Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 10

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's love to guide our discipleship. It was written by Bernadette Farrell, a Roman Catholic hymn-writer and social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. Chorus:

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. Chorus:

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. Chorus:

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. Chorus:

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. Chorus:

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Giver of life throughout the universe, your compassion sustains us, you bless humankind with your redemptive love, a love we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. We are grateful that he has broken the power

of sin and death, reconciling sinful human beings to you, our heavenly Father and offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve, or can do to earn it.

Therefore, as we come to offer you our praise, adoration and thanksgiving today, take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate your holiness, goodness and glory. Amen.

We come to the Lord again, as we offer our prayer of thanksgiving and confession. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy,' please respond with 'Hear our prayer'.

Loving Lord, accept our wholehearted thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet that you made for us, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities to serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for boundless love us even at our worst, when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess our failure to live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and sometimes disregard your call to care for others in Jesus' name, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience. In a time of reflection, we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, of being self-centred, rather than Christ-centred.

Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer.**

Lord of righteousness, help us turn away from wrongdoing and back to you. Warm and soften our hearts and guide us with your truth. Bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death, allowing us to play our part in building your kingdom here.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus as his disciples, without the burden of guilt. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives become a beacon to draw others to know, love and serve our risen Saviour. 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 in 1974 by Revd. Bryn Rees, a Congregationalist Minister at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London. One of the melodies to which this hymn is set was written by Revd. Jones' organist, Gerald Barnes and is called "Tetherdown"! We shall sing 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}

We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away.

Lord of light and life, Christ Jesus came as the Saviour of this sin-darkened, broken world, for which we pray now. In recognition of your boundless grace to us, we offer ourselves to play what part we can to build your kingdom here as we reach out to neighbours who are in distress or need. However, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, our gracious heavenly Father, to whom nothing is impossible. Move the hearts and minds of people who wield greater power and influence to encourage them to bring about much-needed change. Nevertheless, help us to play our part to build your kingdom by our discipleship.

Jesus came to bring healing and comfort to the marginalised and ill whom he met, so we pray for healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need. In your mercy, hear our prayer for people who are lonely, depressed, or anxious, for those who are experiencing problems with addictions, or with relationships and for those who have been bereaved. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone know who need your help at this time

Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience comfort, hope and peace.

Sovereign Lord, on the Sunday after Holocaust Remembrance Day, when we recall the murder of six million Jews and many, many Slavs, Russians, socialists, Gypsies, gays and lesbians, we pray for the victims of war and man's inhumanity to man. We have not learned, for there have been genocides since 1945, including in Cambodia and Rwanda. Indeed, it is highly likely that between 20000 and 30000 Iranians have been killed by the authorities in three days of unrest last month. And so we pray for peace in the many lands where fighting mars the lives of ordinary people, especially Ukraine and the Holy Land, Myanmar, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Lord, remember people affected by terrorism, oppression and discrimination. Bring an end to their suffering and grant them the support and hope they need to rebuild their lives. Guide the leaders of the world to resist the temptation to use force in order to impose their will on others. Teach them instead to see value in negotiation and compromise when disagreements arise.

Heavenly Father, we pray for people in the Caribbean and Filipinos who are recovering from a recent hurricane and typhoons, for Californians, Greeks, Sumatrans and people in the UK who have experienced severe floods, too. May they swiftly receive the help they need to repair their damaged properties and disrupted lives. Grant them courage and resilience to deal with the effects of these disasters and to rebuild what they have lost.

Lord of all, may your Holy Spirit fill, guide and inspire your church, not only here, but churches in local Circuits and, indeed, the World Church. Unite us in love and service, so we may proclaim good news in words and actions. Help us all to bear the Christ-light faithfully so that our actions and our words proclaim your transformative, redemptive love to all-comers.

Abba, Father, bless us our families and our friends as we answer our call to serve you. May our joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us to let the light of your love shine through everything we do, so we honour you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Martin Lekebusch an I.T. specialist, who was born into a Methodist family in 1962. He is now an elder at a Baptist church in Gloucester. The hymn was written when Martin was attending a Methodist church in inner-city Birmingham. He describes the congregation at that time as “a very mixed bag with a strongly evangelical character to it, with a charismatic aspect – but also an aspect of social engagement.” I have asked that we sing the hymn to “Scarlet Ribbons”, which I’m certain you will know, so you can concentrate upon the words. Hymn number 703, ‘In an age of twisted values,’

1. In an age of twisted values
we have lost the truth we need;
in sophisticated language
we have justified our greed;
by our struggle for possessions
we have robbed the poor and weak –
hear our cry and heal our nation:
your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.

2. We have built discrimination
on our prejudice and fear;
hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
if we hold resentments dear.
For communities divided
by the walls of class and race
hear our cry and heal our nation:
show us, Lord, your love and grace.

3. When our families are broken;
when our homes are full of strife;
when our children are bewildered,
when they lose their way in life;
when we fail to give the aged
all the care we know we should –
hear our cry and heal our nations
with your tender fatherhood.

4. We who hear your word so often
choose so rarely to obey;
turn us from our wilful blindness,

give us truth to light our way.
In the power of your Spirit
come to cleanse us, make us new:
hear our cry and heal our nations
till our nations honour you.

© 1999 Martin Leckebusch (born 1962)

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 5 verses 1 to 12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing a hymn by Revd. John Keble, whose Assize Sermon in 1833, led to the movement of a number of Anglican priests, including John Henry Newman, to the Roman Catholic priesthood, though Revd. Keble himself remained a loyal member of the Church of England. We shall sing hymn number 244, ‘Blest are the pure in heart’.

1. Blest are the pure in heart,
For they shall see our God:
The secret of the Lord is theirs;
Their soul is Christ’s abode.

2. The Lord who left the heavens
Our life and peace to bring,
To dwell on earth in lowliness,
Our pattern and our King.

3. Still to the lowly soul
He doth himself impart,
And for his dwelling and his throne
Chooseth the pure in heart.

4. Lord, we thy presence seek;
May ours this blessing be;
Give us a pure and lowly heart,
A temple meet for thee.

© John Keble (1792 – 1866) & Hall’s Psalms and Hymns vs. 2 & 4

Sermon: “Beatitudes” Mtt 5:1 – 12

The Sermon on the Mount began with what are called ‘The Beatitudes’, because of the use of “Blessed” at the beginning of each of the qualities to which Jesus refers. Unfortunately, ‘Blessed’ is a poor translation of the Greek ‘Makarios’, which is better rendered as ‘happy’,

or better still, 'fortunate'. The Good News Bible uses 'happy', not in the sense of being cheerful, or content, but to be congratulated. Yet, if you consider them at face value, by current standards they seem neither fortunate nor to be congratulated about. After all, there is no mention of celebrity, fame, wealth, power over others, nor pre-eminence in public gatherings. So what was Jesus telling us about kingdom values?

Jesus copied the style of Old Testament poetical books to outline the qualities of true discipleship, so let us examine them, one by one: '**spiritually poor**' means people who humbly trust God, even though their loyalty can lead to their material disadvantage and possibly oppression. Let me be clear; Christ was not commanding poverty, but unlike the worldly, the spiritually poor do not use their talents for their own benefit, to gain wealth or power, which the world reveres, but instead they offer their gifts for the benefit of others. Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven consists of such men and women.

'Those who mourn' are not so much people who are penitent, or have been bereaved: they are saddened by the state of the world, by their own failings and inability to set things right, so they turn to the Lord in their distress. Jesus says they will find inner peace through God's salvation. **'The meek' or 'humble'** are not shrinking violets, but people who are gentle in their dealings and set aside their own wishes to meet the needs of others. As a result, while they may not prosper in worldly terms, they will be favoured by God. **'Those whose greatest desire is to do what God asks of them'** refers to all who answer the Lord's call, whether or not it is convenient to them, or if it sets them at odds with worldly ambitions. **Jesus says they will find satisfaction in their service.**

'Those who are merciful to others' means more than being willing to forgive, although forgiveness is a prerequisite for God's forgiveness. The Hebrew word for '**mercy**' is '**chesed**' – better translated as '**loving-kindness**', so what Christ meant was the more love we give away, the more we shall receive from God. **'The pure in heart'** are not people who put on a pretence of piety to gain the admiration of other people, but those whose lives are pleasing to God, by how they repent their sins and serve him wholeheartedly.

Peacemakers are honoured as God's children, for whilst '**peace**' certainly means resolving conflicts and peace-making has rarely been more important than it is now, the Hebrew '**shalom**' provides a broader definition: besides working to end conflicts, peacemakers also work for the well-being of others, seeking both their material and spiritual prosperity. I am not denigrating peacemakers in international terms, for conflicts in Ukraine, the Holy Land, Congo and Sudan require wholehearted, patient negotiation, for experience has shown that real peace cannot be established by force, but depends upon reconciliation, upon winning the hearts and minds of the people who are fighting: the old war-horse, Sir Winston Churchill remarked, '**Jaw-jaw is better than war-war!**' How true that is.

'Those who are persecuted because they do what God requires' are people who suffer in material terms, or who are scorned by the worldly for living as God directs them, for not compromising their conscience in order to gain favour, wealth, power. They are those who are willing to stand up and be counted when they see injustice, or evil at work, even though they may suffer for doing so. Often, whistle-blowers fall into this category.

Jesus ended by warning followers that they might face persecution and character assassination as a result, but called them not only to be strong but even glad in their suffering, for prophets had often been persecuted and rejected. Christ, too, would be put to suffering and killed for being true to his Father. It was especially pertinent to contemporaries of Matthew, living in Jerusalem, who suffered at the hands of their own

families as well as the authorities at the beginning of Rome's attempt to obliterate Christianity.

It is difficult for us to possess most of these kingdom qualities, yet we see in the gospels how Jesus fulfilled them all: he became poor for our sakes, and was obedient even to death on a cross, trusting his Father to raise him from the dead. Christ mourned that Jerusalem's religious establishment obdurately refused to accept his good news, yet he did not give up on them. Jesus did not seek out the rich, powerful and self-satisfied, but instead reached out to the poor, sinful, diseased and foreigners. Jesus' dealings with the fallen, marginalised, aliens, even the enemies of the Jews, offered healing and reconciliation to all-comers which marked him as the greatest of peacemakers. I shall finish with a short account of a woman who fulfilled most, if not all of the Beatitudes.

Elizabeth Pilenko was born to a rich family in Nineteenth Century Russia, but after the Russian Revolution, she emigrated to Paris and joined a sisterhood of nuns who worked in the capital's poorest districts. She visited the sick and elderly, prepared meals, and did household chores that her patients could not perform themselves, always with a cheerfulness and purpose that endeared her to everybody she met.

Eventually, she founded a hospice in Paris and was given the title, '**Mother Maria**', shortly before France fell to Nazi Germany. The Gestapo and SS set about rounding up Jews, sending those they captured to concentration camps. Mother Maria responded by sheltering Jews in her hospital, before they were taken to safety by the Resistance. Inevitably, she was betrayed, arrested and sent to **Ravensbruck**, where a mass – extermination plan had been put into effect. In the camp, Maria continued to care for the sick and dying, even sharing the little food she had with others. Soon, she became a living skeleton, yet she remained so cheerful that even the guards called her, 'that wonderful Russian nun'.

One day, Maria saw a group of Jewish women assembled outside the gas-chamber, which they had been told was a shower room. However, a young girl, realising its true purpose, began to scream in terror. Before the guards could club the child to death, Mother Maria, ran forward, took her hand and said, "**Don't be frightened, I'll come with you.**" Praying quietly, the pair shuffled forward to their deaths. **We may not be called to offer the same level of sacrificial love, but we are called to love our neighbours, not for our own prestige, but for Jesus' sake. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Jacqueline Jones, a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the United Kingdom for 5 years, but now lives in Christchurch, New Zealand as a vicar's wife. We shall sing 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 evermore. Amen.