

## A service for 1<sup>st</sup> March, 2026 Lent 2 (StF)

### **Call to Worship: Psalm 121 verses 5 to 8**

The LORD watches over you—the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The LORD will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written in 1979 to celebrate the bi-centenary of John Wesley's preaching in Paradise Square, Sheffield. The words and melody of this one were composed during a train journey between London and Chesterfield and it was inspired by the opening of the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book", which reads 'Methodism was born in song.' The author, Revd. Brian Hoare was New Testament Tutor at Cliff College and in 1979 he was serving as a member of the main committee that created "Hymns and Psalms". We shall sing hymn number 21, 'Born in song'.*

#### **1. Born in song!**

**God's people have always been singing.**

**Born in song!**

**Hearts and voices raised.**

**So today we worship together;**

**God alone is worthy to be praised.**

#### **2. Praise to God!**

**For he is the one who has made us.**

**Praise to God!**

**We his image bear.**

**Heaven and earth are full of his glory;**

**Let creation praise him everywhere.**

#### **3. Christ is King!**

**He left all the glory of heaven.**

**Christ is King!**

**Born to share in our pain;**

**Crucified, for sinners atoning,**

**Risen, exalted, soon to come again.**

#### **4. Sing the song!**

**God's Spirit is poured out among us.**

**Sing the song!**

**He has made us anew.**

**Every member part of the Body;**

**Given his power, his will to seek and do.**

#### **5. Tell the world!**

**All power to Jesus is given.**

**Tell the world!**

**He is with us always.**

**Spread the word, that all may receive him;**

**Every tongue confess and sing his praise.**

6. Then the end!

Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory.

Then the end

Of all earthly days.

Yet above the song will continue;

All his people still shall sing his praise.

© Brian Hoare (born 1935)

***Let us pray.***

Dear God, Father of all creation, we lift our eyes to you the maker of heaven and earth. We adore you Lord because you watch over us – In the brightness of the day and in the quiet of the night. We adore you Lord because you keep us from harm, because you will not let our foot slip, because you guard us now and forevermore.

Lord, we confess that too often we do not lift our eyes to you. We look to others or ourselves for help, we look to human solutions, to the busyness of life, to distraction and forget that true help comes from you.

We confess that sometimes we allow our lives to become overwhelmed and we forget that you will keep us from all harm. Forgive us for the times when we doubt your protection, when we doubt that you are watching over us always. Restore in us a trust that you do not slumber, that you do not take pause in looking over us.

Lord with grateful hearts we thank you. For the times You have kept us from harm, for dangers known and unknown, for journeys completed safely, for strength given in weakness, and for comfort in restless nights. Thank You for being our constant Guardian. As we step forward into the days ahead, help us to walk without fear, trusting that You go before us, beside us, and behind us. We lift our eyes to You today, our Help and our Keeper, and offer You our praise and thanksgiving. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that Jesus taught us.***

**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 introduce our prayers of intercession with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care. He has seen much of the world's brokenness through his work and his words may reflect our feelings when we listen to the news. Colin is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. Hymn number 629, 'God of my faith, I offer you my doubt'.*

**1. 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.**

**2. 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.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,  
When I sink down in sadness or despair,  
When in depression I cannot be touched,  
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

**4. 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.**

**5. 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.**

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for people nearby and far away.***

Gracious, heavenly Father, Christ Jesus came to live among us to save and heal the broken world, for which we now pray. Although you have given us a beautiful planet that ought to provide all our needs and bless humankind, we see daily the suffering resulting largely from human greed, pride, selfishness, cruelty and worst of all, our indifference to our neighbours. We want to serve as your earthly hands by reaching out to needy or troubled people, but we know that the best we have to offer is often insufficient, so we turn to you, for whom nothing is impossible. Lord, inspire and encourage people who wield power and influence to bring about much-needed change.

Lord, we hear of so many parts of the world where there is fighting, death and destruction, so we pray for the leaders of the nations. Guide them to govern justly and mercifully, to negotiate and, where necessary, to compromise, so that disputes do not escalate into warfare. Remember Ukraine on the fourth anniversary of its invasion by Russia, the continuing tensions in the Holy Land, Sudan and Somalia. Assist negotiators to bring about just endings to these conflicts. May the stand-off between the USA and Iran be resolved without fighting and may the civil unrest in Iran be resolved without further violence. Lord, we pray for victims of war, terrorism, prejudice and oppression. Grant them peace and healing of body, mind and spirit through the support and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives and face the future with confidence.

God of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we pray for everybody we know who is ill in body, or mind, or spirit. May people who are waiting for, or recovering from operations receive the treatment and support they require to be restored to health and grant them renewed strength, healing, hope and peace not only by the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need.

We also remember people around us who feel lonely, or neglected, or whose relationships have broken down, or who are struggling with addiction or are bearing the anguish of bereavement. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help at this time .....

Lord, help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can offer them friendship and practical support. We pray that you will enfold all of them in the warmth of your love, so they may experience healing, comfort, courage, hope and lasting peace.

God our Saviour, we pray for this church and churches in our Circuit, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside and all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission to build your kingdom in spirit, love and truth.

Abba, Father, bless us and our families as we seek to answer our call to serve you. May our actions and words tell of the grace and goodness of our Lord to both friend and stranger as we share your abundant with everyone we meet, through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

*Our next hymn could represent the feelings of Nicodemus, who came to Jesus at night to seek to understand Jesus' teachings and ministry – but it could also apply to us on our journey of faith. It was written by Bernadette Farrell, one of a new generation of Roman Catholic hymn-writers and one of the best, too! 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---}

**The Gospel reading is John chapter 3 verses 1 to 17**

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said,  
“Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

In reply Jesus declared,  
“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”  
“How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”

Jesus answered,  
“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

“You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.

I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” Amen.

*Our next hymn was written in 1989 by Brian Doerksen, a Canadian singer-songwriter, when he was only twenty-four years old. We sing hymn number 628, ‘Faithful One, so unchanging’.*

**Faithful One, so unchanging,  
Ageless One, you're my rock of peace.  
Lord of all I depend on you,  
I call out to you gain and again.  
I call out to you again and again.  
You are my rock in times of trouble.  
You lift me up when I fall down.  
All through the storm your love is the anchor,  
My hope is in you alone.**

© Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

**Sermon:** *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” John 3:3*

Our Gospel reading relates how Nicodemus, a respected member of the Sanhedrin – seventy rabbis who were responsible for both religious decisions and, under Roman jurisdiction, for civil rule in Judah – visited Jesus by night. He probably did so, because he knew how opposition towards Jesus was growing in the Council of Elders and did not want to become mired in controversy. Nevertheless, Nicodemus wanted to know more about Jesus’ teaching, yet he did not understand that Jesus was more than a prophet and miracle-worker, for he addressed him as a rabbi and a teacher, but not as the Messiah.

When Jesus’ replied, **“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again”**, Nicodemus was certain that the Lord had not referred to a second physical birth, but could not grasp what kind of birth Jesus alluded to. Now the Greek used in John’s original text is **anōthen**, meaning not only ‘again’, but ‘from above’, so what Jesus actually meant was that we need to be transformed spiritually,

from the kingdom of human darkness into the kingdom of God's light. Jesus' reference to water and the Spirit was probably a guide to the pathway of salvation, for baptism, signifying repentance – turning away from sin and returning to God – often preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit. In effect, Nicodemus was told that, in order to enter the kingdom of God, we must turn to him (that is, repent) before we can be reborn by the Spirit.

Nicodemus was still uncertain about the nature of the Holy Spirit, for he did not usually make his dwelling among ordinary people in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus told him that Isaiah, Joel and Ezekiel had spoken of a new age with its working of the Ruach or Holy Spirit. Ezekiel had said, **“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws”**. Although he was one of Judah's leading scholars, Nicodemus still found it difficult to comprehend what Jesus was telling him, because it challenged so much of what he believed and represented.

After all, as a Pharisee, Nicodemus believed that people would gain the Lord's favour by scrupulously observing Torah, the Law given to Moses, and all the 613 Rules of Righteousness; yet Jesus was offering God's favour through faith, not by works. After a lifetime of labouring under the heavy yoke of justification by law, Nicodemus was being offered the easier gift of justification by faith! To reinforce that point, Christ declared that, just as the rebellious Israelites had been saved from the bites of venomous snakes when they looked at the bronze snake on a pole that Moses raised, so sinful human beings would be saved if they looked on him – or believed in him – after he had been lifted up on his cross.

Whether or not Jesus actually said, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him,”** or John was making his own statement of faith, those two sentences are probably the most telling in the gospels: **God loves all people, not just a select few, so much that he gave his Son's life to save us from our sins if only we trust in Jesus and follow his teachings.** We are saved by faith, so we are free to serve the Father as a response to his grace.

Whilst it is uncertain that Nicodemus found the faith he needed to follow Jesus, it is recorded that he rebuked the Pharisees in the Sanhedrin for condemning Jesus without hearing him and he helped Joseph of Arimathea to bury the Lord, so perhaps he did become a follower.

An Axolotl is an amphibian native to Mexico. It exists quite happily as a tadpole, because the water is always warm and food is abundant, even producing axolotl tadpoles. However, a few years ago, a French scientist took some axolotls to Paris. She wanted to see how they would react to cooler water and a different diet, but she hardly expected the outcome, for the axolotls suddenly developed into salamanders! Clearly, in a favourable, sheltered environment axolotls did not need to mature into what Nature had intended them to be, so they had to be challenged to find new life.

Lent is an ideal time to consider our own discipleship. Are we simply coasting as individuals, or as a church, content with the status quo, or are we dissatisfied, but afraid to make changes? I retired as a MHA Chaplain three years ago this Easter, not to seek a life of idleness, but to explore new ways of serving Christ in this Circuit and neighbouring Dudley. For years I have advocated the Methodist call to reach out and support our communities, so I have stepped outside my comfort zone and started a number of new

ventures, including working with Carol as lead volunteers at a Parkinson's exercise class at Brierley Hill Methodist Church. I am also part of a team leading "Thanks for the Memories" dementia-friendly singalongs and reminiscence sessions at Amblecote Wordsley. "Thanks for the Memories" is held on Sunday afternoons once a month and is open to all-comers, not only church-goers. Anyone who enjoys singing and who likes to reminisce is welcome. Lest any of you think this transition has been easy, let me put you straight. I hated the idea of leaving the comfort of a calling I loved for eighteen years and, to be honest, I was a little apprehensive, too. However, I believe Christ has called me to walk a different path and if it was good enough for Abram at seventy-five, it is good enough for me, for I have Christ alongside.

As a church, or as individuals, are we being challenged to a new start, or a new direction? Are we too comfortable to allow ourselves to develop as the Lord would like us to? Do we need to leave our comfort zones in order to realize our true potential? This Lent, as we walk with Christ to Gethsemane, Calvary and the empty tomb, let us make time to really explore his will, so that we may use our gifts, graces and talents to his glory. Lord, our Redeemer, grant us the faith to let go of the familiar and follow where you lead us. Amen.

*Our closing hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1749, one of a number hymns headed "Hymns for a Preacher of the Gospel". It was written when Charles was suffering with depression, but elder brother, John, edited it in such a way that it is a hymn full of conviction, well-suited to any preacher! Hymn number 661, 'Give me the faith which can remove / And sink the mountain to a plain'.*

**1. Give me the faith which can remove  
And sink the mountain to a plain;  
Give me the child-like praying love,  
Which longs to build thy house again;  
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,  
And all my simple soul devour.**

**2. I would the precious time redeem,  
And longer live for this alone;  
To spend, and to be spent, for them  
Who have not yet my Saviour known;  
Fully on these my mission prove,  
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.**

**3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,  
Into thy blessed hands receive;  
And let me live to preach thy word,  
And let me to thy glory live;  
My every sacred moment spend  
In publishing the sinners' friend.**

**4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart  
With boundless charity divine;  
So shall I all my strength exert,  
And love them with a zeal like thine;  
And lead them to thy open side,  
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

***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.**