

A service for 20th February, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 37 vs. 3 & 4

Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Bernadette Farrell, a social activist from West Yorkshire and one of the best contemporary hymn-writers. Although she is a Roman Catholic, her hymns are as ecumenical in nature as they are profound. This hymn seems particularly apt in these time of pandemic and uncertainty. 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, Creator of heaven and earth, we have come to worship and adore you today. Author and Sustainer of all life, we have come to worship and adore you today. Saviour of the world, our true Light and Guide, we have come to worship and adore you today, for you created us in your image, gave us stewardship over the world and have striven to draw us into the closest of relationships with you, where, as your earthly children, we may call you 'Abba', 'Daddy'. Your love for us is so remarkable that, even when we set ourselves against you and made ourselves your enemy, you persevered and shared our mortal flesh by coming as Jesus Christ.

Jesus grew up among people like us, sharing our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, our trials and temptations, yet doing so without sinning, showing us how you want us to live. We believe his death and resurrection broke the shackles of sin and

death and through Christ we have eternal life through faith in him. Therefore, amazing heavenly Father, take away all our anxieties and distractions, so we may pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your guiding word, so we can offer you all honour, glory power and praise in our worship, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please reply, 'Hear our prayer'.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your boundless, steadfast love that has not only given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which to live, but offers us blessings day-by-day. Thank you for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us, for challenges that shape our character and for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care. Most of all, thank you for loving us at times when we are faithless, loveless and unlovable.

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

Merciful Lord, we ask you to pardon and restore us as we recall times when we have not loved you wholeheartedly, when we have ignored your call to serve you, when we have failed to care for our neighbours as we know we ought, especially when they are in distress, or need help. Forgive us, too, when we try to justify our sinfulness, rather than do what we know we should. Help us to change our ways, to become less self-centred and more Christ-centred.

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

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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 June 1966 by a former West Yorkshire school teacher, Rosamond Herklots, whilst she was digging out weeds in her nephew's garden. It shows that the Holy Spirit can talk to us anywhere and any-time. Hymn number 423, "Forgive our sins as we forgive,"

1. 'Forgive our sins as we forgive',

**You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.**

**2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?**

**3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!**

**4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.**

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, every day you bless us with your love, so in response we offer ourselves to act as your earthly hands. We recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, give us the courage to play what part we can to build a better world by campaigning against injustice, by doing all we can to relieve poverty, by using the earth's resources more carefully and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting and even celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to divide us.

We pray for people from the Developing World who are desperately short of COVID19 vaccines, at the same time that surplus vaccines are becoming time-expired in warehouses. We pray that excess vaccines from the Developed World will be distributed, to protect our poorer brothers and sisters against coronavirus and so fewer strains of COVID emerge to threaten us.

Lord of shalom, we pray for peace in a time of heightened tensions between Ukraine and Russia which could spill into open conflict. Indeed, we pray that you will teach the leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force. May they learn to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace prevail. Remember, O Lord, the victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the support and encouragement they need to find healing in body, mind and spirit as well as being able to rebuild their lives. Hear our prayers for our brothers and sisters who endure discrimination because of their race, colour or creed and help us work to end prejudice by our own example of loving-kindness.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where famines and conflicts threaten the lives of millions. We ask that governments and relief agencies are able and willing to avert large-scale catastrophes in these countries.

Gracious Lord, look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, particularly those whose condition has been worsened as a result of lack of treatment during the last two years of pandemic. Help them find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of professional care and support they receive, but by experiencing your loving presence in their need.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who have lost loved-ones because of COVID19, for others who have lost loved-ones during this pandemic and for whom funerals and mourning have been restricted; we pray for neighbours who are suffering from long COVID19, depression and anxiety, for all who have lost work, or who are burdened by debt because lockdown; we think of neighbours who are lonely, afraid, or who feel abandoned, people whose relationships have broken down and, not least of all, children whose education and wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident you will know their needs and will reach out to them in loving-kindness: Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and embrace everybody for whom

we pray with the warmth of your love, offering them healing, courage, comfort and lasting peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church as we begin to emerge from the shadow of coronavirus. Help us learn new, effective ways to serve our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts.

Lord, may we never forget the people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: workers in the NHS, carers both in homes and in the community, scientists who are developing both anti-COVID vaccines and medicines, besides the army of key-workers in production, transportation, warehousing and retail throughout the country. Bless them all and may they remain successful and safe in their work.

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.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 6 verses 27 to 38

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even 'sinners' lend to 'sinners', expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Amen.

We continue with a hymn by New Zealander Richard Gillard. It took him more than a year to complete, for he wrote the first verse in 1976 and the remainder in 1977. I think it was worth the wait! We shall sing hymn number 611, 'Brother, sister, let me serve you'.

**1. Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you:
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too.**

**2. We are pilgrims on a journey,
And companions on the road;
We are here to help each other
Walk the mile and bear the load.**

**3. I will hold the Christ-light for you
In the night-time of your fear;**

**I will hold my hand out to you,
Speak the peace you long to hear.**

**4. I will weep when you are weeping:
When you laugh, I'll laugh with you.
I will share your joy and sorrow
Till we've seen this journey through.**

**5. When we sing to God in heaven,
We shall find such harmony;
Born of all we've known together
Of Christ's love and agony.**

**6. Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you:
Pray that I may have the grace to
Let you be my servant, too.**

Richard Gillard © 1977 Scripture in Song

Address: *'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you' Luke 6:27*

Today's reading is a continuation of Jesus' sermon on the plain and it relates how Jesus told his followers, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also". I imagine some of his listeners may have considered his teaching absurd, if not treacherous, for Palestine was under Roman occupation and Jews were taxed heavily by Caesar. Surely, patriotic Jews would have reasoned that they ought to use every opportunity to strike at Romans, for Torah commanded them to love their neighbour, by the First Century Jews only regarded fellow-Jews as neighbours and considered Gentiles damned and unclean. Indeed, Jews would not go into a Gentile household, for they would become ceremonially unclean by doing so. This explains why the centurion sent a message that Jesus need not enter his house to heal his servant, but only had to say the word for healing to occur. The centurion did not only possess great faith, but considered Jesus' position.

Christ is asking a great deal of his listeners – and us – for it really is not easy to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, or if someone takes your cloak, not to stop him from taking your tunic. However, he did not mean we should literally allow people to assault us and steal from us – that would result in a race of battered, but saintly paupers and another race of prosperous thugs and villains. The aim of this teaching is the love that Christians should display should be greater than the Greek storge – a liking of someone, or eros – romantic love, or even of philia, or brotherly love. Christians should display agapeo, love given unconditionally, unmerited and free.

Now, it is relatively easy to care for those we like, for people who are like us, who share our values, who don't act against us or threaten our interests, but far less to care for those who hate us and what we stand for. I say 'relatively easy', for if we consider Paul's letters to the Corinthian churches, all was not light and peace there, in fact their differences were tearing them apart. Jesus' declaration, 'Do to others as you would have them do to you', was not a new teaching, for Rabbi Hillel had previously taught somebody who asked him to teach the Law of Moses whilst he, Hillel, was standing on one foot, 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary'. Nevertheless, this is the heart of Christ's teaching. We ought

not strike out in anger, but give a measured response. We must be generous if we see somebody in need, whatever our feelings toward them.

Jesus certainly lived out his teachings: he offered forgiveness to tax collectors, who were not only seen as collaborators with Rome, but crooks who demanded more than they were entitled to and kept the difference; he offered grace to fallen women, like the much-wedded Syro-Phoenician at Jacob's well; he healed the lame, blind and deranged, all of whom were deemed sinners under God's judgment; he bore his betrayal, mock trial, abuse by the Sanhedrin and scourging without retaliating and when he was crucified, he did not call an army of angels to destroy his enemies, but asked his Father to forgive them. "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!" No greater words of grace have ever been uttered, for Jesus is agape personified: undying, unconquerable love.

You may ask if such forgiveness is possible for us. Here is a story that suggests it is. When Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942, its Bishop, John Wilson was arrested and accused of spying. He was sent to Changi Gaol, where, for eight months he was tortured by Kempei-Tai, as the Japanese secret police were known. They tried their hardest to break him into making a forced confession and they were experts in psychological warfare. Bishop Wilson was savagely beaten and faced what we now call water-boarding. Finally, he had to endure the terrible water hose torture. The Bishop wrote this of his experiences: "After my first beating, I was almost afraid to pray for courage, lest I should have another opportunity of exercising it. Many hours of pain were a severe test. In the middle of torture, I was asked if I still believed in God. When by God's help I replied, "I do." They asked me why God did not save me. By the help of the Holy Spirit I replied, "God does save me; he does not save me by freeing me from you or punishment, but he saves me by giving me the spirit to bear it." When they asked me why I did not curse them, I told them that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, I was taught that we were all brethren."

In midst of suffering he tried to pray "Father forgive them", but he found it impossible until, in his own words, "By the grace of God, I saw those men not as they were, but as they had been; as little children, as children loved by their mothers and fathers, as children sharing love with their brothers and sisters – before they were brutalised by false nationalism." By looking at his enemies in a new light, Bishop Wilson found grace through Christ to forgive and love his brutish torturers. When they failed to break Bishop Wilson's spirit, he was returned to the prison camp. After the war, several former captors came to Bishop Wilson to be christened, because they recognised something special in his ability to forgive. As Bishop of Birmingham it was most appropriate that he led worship at the Festival of Remembrance in the Royal Albert Hall. No one should think forgiveness is easy, for it comes at a personal cost. However, it pales into insignificance when we consider what it cost Jesus Christ to earn forgiveness for the sins of the world at Calvary. Generous God, help us learn to care for all-comers, as our Saviour did, even when we find it hard to like them. 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 and is enjoying the role of 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, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and for evermore. Amen.