

## A service for 20<sup>th</sup> March, 2022: Lent 3 (StF)

### Lent Prayer.

Loving, heavenly Father, it is so easy to abuse our authority over others, to misuse our spiritual gifts and skills and to possess more than we need, rather than helping less fortunate neighbours. Help us to resist temptation to act selfishly and cruelly. Instead, guide us by the perfect example of your dear Son, our Saviour, who gave himself generously as the atonement offering for the sins of the world. Amen.

### Call to worship: Psalm 63 verses 2 to 5

I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory. Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live, and in your name I will lift up my hands. My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by Martin J. Nystrom, a songwriter, was born in 1956 in Seattle, Washington. After graduating from Oral Roberts University with a degree in music education, Nystrom worked as a music director for the New York branch of Christ for the Nations. More recently he has served as a song development manager for Integrity Music, for whom he has written more than seventy songs. Our hymn which is based on the opening of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Psalm, was written in 1984. We shall sing number 37, 'As the deer pants for the water'.*

**1. As the deer pants for the water,  
So my soul longs after you.**

**You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship you: Chorus**  
*You alone are my strength, my shield,  
To you alone may my spirit yield.  
You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship you.*

**2. I want you more than gold or silver,  
Only you can satisfy.**

**You alone are the real joy-giver  
And the apple of my eye: Chorus**

**3. You're my friend and you are my brother,  
Even though you are a king.**

**I love you more than any other,  
So much more than anything: Chorus**

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### Let us pray

Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, Sustainer of all life, and Saviour of the world, we come to worship and adore you today. Your wisdom and power are as unfathomable as your love is boundless and everlasting. You for you created us in your image, gave us stewardship over the world and want to draw us into the closest of relationships with you, where, as your earthly children, your holy priesthood, we may call you 'Abba', 'Daddy'. We find it remarkable that, even when we set ourselves against you and made ourselves your enemy, you persevered with us and shared our mortal flesh through Jesus Christ.

Jesus grew up among people like us, sharing our experiences and emotions, yet lived 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 alone we have eternal life. 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, to 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.***

Heavenly Father, thank you for your boundless, steadfast love that offers us blessings day-by-day. Thank you for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us, for challenges that both test us and shape our character and for people who have guided and cared for us. Most of all, thank you for loving us at times when we have been faithless, loveless and unlovable.

Merciful Lord, we ask you to pardon and restore us as we recall situations when we have neither loved nor served you wholeheartedly and when we have failed to love 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, so we become more Christ-centred and less self-centred.

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.**

*We continue our worship as we sing a hymn written by Samuel Crossman, who lived in troubled times: in his lifetime the English Civil War and the Restoration happened; King Charles 1 was beheaded, "The Book of Common Prayer" was outlawed and the celebration of Christmas was forbidden. He was born in Suffolk, graduated from Cambridge University, was appointed King's Chaplain, became Prebendary or Dean of Bristol Cathedral, where in 1664 he wrote a pamphlet of nine poems, one of which was "My song is love unknown". We sing hymn number 277, 'My song is love unknown;'*

**1. My song is love unknown,  
My Saviour's love for me,  
Love to the loveless shown,  
That they might lovely be.**

**O who am I.**

**That for my sake  
My Lord should take  
Frail flesh and die?**

**2. He came from his blest throne,  
Salvation to bestow;  
But men made strange and none**

The longed-for Christ would know.  
But O my Friend,  
My Friend indeed,  
Who at my need  
His life did spend.

3. Sometimes they strew his way,  
And his sweet praises sing;  
Resounding all the day  
Hosannas to their King.  
Then 'Crucify!'  
Is all their breath,  
And for his death  
They thirst and cry.

4. Why, what hath my Lord done?  
What makes this rage and spite?  
He made the lame to run,  
He gave the blind their sight.  
Sweet injuries!  
Yet they at these  
Themselves displease  
And 'gainst him rise.

5. They rise and needs will have  
My dear Lord made away:  
A murderer they save,  
The Prince of Life they slay;  
Yet cheerful he  
To suffering goes,  
That he his foes  
From thence might free.

6. In life no house, no home,  
My Lord on earth might have;  
In death no friendly tomb  
But what a stranger gave.  
What may I say?  
Heaven was his home;  
But mine the tomb  
Wherein he lay.

7. Here might I stay and sing,  
No story so divine:  
Never was love, dear King,  
Never was grief like thine!  
This is my Friend,  
In whose sweet praise  
I all my days  
Could gladly spend.

***We come now to our prayers of intercession. We begin with a prayer for Ukraine. Let us pray.***

Lord of all nations, you made us and understand everything about us. You declared creation 'good', yet we have been poor stewards of the world and our failure to live in peace with our neighbours is heart-breaking. At present our hearts go out to Ukraine and its peoples, as they face attacks by Russia.

In your mercy Lord, be with all Ukrainians: President Zelenskyy, his advisors, the armed forces and militia as they resist Russia's might; civilians, women, children and elderly, who have to shelter from bombardment and who face diminishing supplies. Grant them steadfast courage and look on them with compassion. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. May they be made welcome and receive all the support they need.

We pray that a peace treaty can be negotiated to end the conflict, that the Kremlin's plans are frustrated and so Ukraine will remain a free, democracy after hostilities have ceased. May other nations continue to provide practical support and hospitality not only during the conflict, but as long as help is needed.

Above all, Lord, restore peace to Ukraine and help it rebuild what war has destroyed. We offer our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

***We continue with prayers about our concerns for the world.***

Heavenly Father, although we have been blessed with this achingly beautiful planet, we grieve and lament about the brokenness we see here and abroad. We want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that, at times, many complex issues threaten to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with greater ability, power and influence than we possess; people who can heal the suffering around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Nevertheless, Lord, give us the courage to play what part we can by campaigning against injustice, by doing all we can to relieve poverty, by learning to use the earth's resources more carefully and by encouraging others to do so, too.

Lord of the world, as well as praying for an end to the conflict in Ukraine, we pray for peace across the world. Guide the leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving disputes with neighbours by negotiation rather than resorting to force. Instead, may world leaders learn to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace be established and prevail.

In your mercy, remember, O Lord, all victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution. Grant them the resources and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives and to be healed in body, mind and spirit.

We pray for the people of Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Yemen and Sudan where serious famines may lead to catastrophic loss of life. May the situation in Ukraine not divert the attention of governments and relief agencies from providing much-needed aid.

Gracious Lord of well-being, look with compassion on people around us who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, particularly those whose condition has been worsened as a result of a lack of treatment during the last two years of pandemic. May they receive the professional care and support they need to be restored to health and may they experience your loving presence to provide comfort and hope in their time of need.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who have lost loved-ones during the past two years, both because of COVID19 and for other reasons, but who have been unable either to mark their passing or to mourn because of restrictions at funerals. We pray for neighbours who are suffering from long COVID19, depression and anxiety, unemployment,

or debt because of the pandemic. May they be helped to regain their well-being. Gracious God, we pray for neighbours who are lonely, or afraid, or whose relationships have broken down and, not least of all, children whose education and general wellbeing have been seriously harmed during the pandemic. Lord, wherever possible, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and we ask you to 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 churches in our district and, indeed, the World Church as we 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.

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.

**The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 9**

At that time some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whom Pilate had killed while they were offering sacrifices to God. Jesus answered them, "Because those Galileans were killed in that way, do you think it proves that they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did. What about those eighteen people in Siloam who were killed when the tower fell on them? Do you suppose this proves that they were worse than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No indeed! And I tell you that if you do not turn from your sins, you will all die as they did."

Then Jesus told them this parable: "There was once a man who had a fig tree growing in his vineyard. He went looking for figs on it but found none. So he said to his gardener, 'Look, for three years I have been coming here looking for figs on this fig tree, and I haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it go on using up the soil?'

But the gardener answered, 'Leave it alone, sir, just one more year; I will dig round it and put in some manure. Then if the tree bears figs next year, so much the better; if not, then you can have it cut down.'" Amen.

*Our next hymn was written by Frederick William Faber, who like Cardinal Newman, was an Anglican priest who became a Roman Catholic priest. Both men founded oratories, Cardinal Newman in Edgbaston, Birmingham and Revd. Faber at Brompton, London. Sadly, the saintly Cardinal described Brompton as 'second-rate', which is a shame as the two priest had once been friends! We shall sing hymn number 683, 'There's a wideness in God's mercy,'*

**1. There's a wideness in God's mercy**

**Like the wideness of the sea;  
There's a kindness in his justice,  
Which is more than liberty.**

**2. There is plentiful redemption**

**In the blood that has been shed;  
There is joy for all the members / In the sorrows of the Head.**

**3. There is grace enough for thousands**

**Of new worlds as great as this;  
There is room for fresh creations / In that upper home of bliss.**

4. For the love of God is broader  
Than the measures of the mind;  
And the heart of the Eternal  
Is most wonderfully kind.

5. But we make his love too narrow  
By false limits of our own;  
And we magnify his strictness  
With a zeal he will not own.

6. If our love were but more simple,  
We should take him at his word;  
And our lives would be illumined  
By the presence of our Lord.

© Frederick William Faber {1814 – 63}

*"Singing the Faith" version*

**Address: "But unless you repent, you too will all perish." Luke 13:5**

The gospel reading follows a passage when Jesus urged the crowd to seek what is right in God's sight, rather than going for litigation, hoping for a more favourable judgement from a court. Some of his listeners raised a case of a number of Galileans who were slain by Pontius Pilate's soldiers when they were making sacrifices in the temple. Now there is no official record of such a massacre, but it is likely that the Galileans were supporters of Judas of Galilee, who twenty years earlier, had opposed both the payment of taxes to Rome and Pilate's construction of an aqueduct into Jerusalem. The historian, Josephus, described how soldiers had mingled among the crowds before striking down the rebels. Evidently, the listeners hoped to hear whether or not Jesus would agree with the generally-held view that such a fate was a sign of divine judgement upon the Galileans' sinful ways.

Jesus replied that the victims were not more sinful than others and deserved their fate no more than anybody else. Indeed, he added, everybody who did not repent of his or her sins would perish. Clearly noting the jibe that Pilate's victims were Galileans, he pointedly asked if eighteen people who had perished when a tower on the city wall – near to the Pool of Siloam – collapsed, were greater sinners than other Judeans. The rhetorical nature of his question indicated that God's judgement is universal, rather than partisan. Therefore, everybody needs to repent, lest they perish. Christ was not saying that impenitence will automatically result in a sticky end, for we are all mortal beings and our life span is not determined by our righteousness, or sinfulness. So when he said, "But unless you repent, you too will all perish", Jesus was referring to spiritual death, separation from God, besides warning against complacency and highlighting others' sins, whilst ignoring one's own. The word, '**repent**', is interesting, for the Hebrew '**Shub**' means far more than saying '**Sorry**'. **Shub** means to return, to turn from sin back towards God; turning our lives round, honouring the commandments to love God wholeheartedly and to love others as we love ourselves.

The parable of the barren fig-tree is a clear reference to the Jewish nation, who regarded themselves as God's chosen people, for the vineyard image was used in both the Old and New Testament. However, instead of the usual reference to grapes as the chosen fruit, this parable has the vineyard owner seeking figs of a three year old tree, by which time fruit ought to have been produced. Vineyards were established on fertile ground, walled to isolate them from perennial weeds and cultivated with loving care, so that good crops of fruit could be grown. It is understandable that the owner would have

been so disappointed by the unproductive fig-tree that he ordered it to be cut down: it is not unreasonable to expect some return for his investment.

The vinedresser represents Jesus as mankind's intercessor, appealing for a stay of judgement. He said that, if his master would grant him one more year, he would do everything he could to make it productive, but if it still failed to bear fruit, then the owner could cut it down. The meaning of the parable was that Jews had been given ample opportunities to produce fruits of righteousness, but had not done so and therefore deserved to be condemned, but Christ himself was pleading for more time, so they might turn away from a show of righteousness to faithful living. In other words, although judgement is inevitable, we are all given every opportunity to amend our ways, for God's merciful arms are open wide to embrace us to the fifty ninth minute of the eleventh hour.

Lent is a time when we are aware of the price Jesus paid to intercede for us all. At Calvary, Christ became the one perfect sacrifice for all the sins of the world, so that we do not need to make sacrifices to appease an affronted God, but instead by repenting of our wrongdoing we are assured of God's forgiveness. Nevertheless, it is a daunting thought that, in order to redeem us, God's own Son was brutally beaten, humiliated, mocked by enemies and died under a Deuteronomic curse. It is a measure of God's love for sinners like us that he invested the most loved and valuable thing he had to free us from the power of sin and death.

Now is the time to choose to bear fruits of our faith, to show evidence of our discipleship in our lives, by how we respect and care for others, how we let Christ's love shine through our words and deeds, for words alone are not enough. If our lives are not changed by our faith in Christ Jesus, then our faith is barren. **May Jesus continue to change us, so our lives bear sweet fruits of our faith. Amen.**

*During 1886, Dwight Moody held a series of meetings at Brockton, Massachusetts with Daniel Brink Towner as his lead singer, instead of Ira Sankey. During a testimony session at one of these meetings, a young man stood up and declared, "I am not quite sure – but I am going to trust and I am going to obey!" Mr. Towner never discovered the name of the young man, but felt moved to write down what he had said. Soon afterwards, he wrote about the event to a friend, Revd. John Sammis, a Presbyterian minister and it was John Sammis who was inspired to write the words for our closing hymn, 'Trust and obey'. We shall sing number 760.*

**1. When we walk with the Lord  
In the light of his word,  
What a glory he sheds on our way!  
While we do his good will,  
He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey: *Chorus:*  
*Trust and obey, for there's no other way  
To be happy in Jesus  
But to trust and obey.***

**2. Not a burden we bear,  
Not a sorrow we share,  
But our toil he doth richly repay;  
Not a grief nor a loss,**

Not a frown nor a cross,  
But is blest if we trust and obey. *Chorus:*

3. But we never can prove  
The delights of his love  
Until all on the altar we lay;  
For the favour he shows,  
And the joy he bestows,  
Are for them who will trust and obey: *Chorus:*

4. Then in fellowship sweet  
We will sit at his feet,  
Or we'll walk by his side in the way;  
What he says we will do,  
Where he sends we will go –  
Never fear, only trust and obey: *Chorus:*

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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.