

A service for 20th September, 2020 {StF}

Our Call to Worship is Psalm 145 verses 8 to 10

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made. All you have made will praise you, O LORD; your saints will extol you. Amen.

Our opening hymn is by John Bell and Graham Maule, who work with the Iona Community and often set their hymns to Scots ballads. This is set to an untitled Gaelic melody, which is easy to pick up and sing. I think that if you listened to the first verse, you'd have no trouble at all. It's just a pity we can't sing in church at the moment! Number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

**1. Jesus calls us here to meet him
As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.**

**2. Jesus calls us to confess him
Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall,
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.**

**3, Jesus calls us to each other,
Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.
Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.**

**4. Jesus calls us to his table
Rooted firm in time and space,
Where the Church in earth and heaven
Finds a common meeting-place.
Share the bread and wine, his body;
Share the love of which we sing;
Share the feast for saints and sinners
Hosted by our Lord and King.**

Hosted by our Lord and King. © John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Mauler (born 1958)

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Almighty God, you are the Word who spoke and brought our universe to life; you made the earth on which we live and not only created human beings, but gave us stewardship of this beautiful planet. Through your great faithfulness, you sustain us and all living things. In your love, you call us to you as your earthly sons and daughters, offering us a covenant of love and faithfulness. You know everything about us: our virtues and vices,

our successes and our failures for, in order to bring us close, you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus. His life, death and resurrection show us how we should live in harmony with you and one another and broke the power of sin and death, offering us an everlasting covenant with you. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, help us to concentrate and to adore you in love, spirit and truth.

Heavenly Father, accept our heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: for all you have done for us, given us and achieved in us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even at our worst when don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly. Forgive us, too, when we say and do things that cause offence and hurt our neighbours. Help us change our ways as we repent and renew our souls with your loving-kindness.

Merciful Lord, as you hear and answer our prayers, we believe that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you once again. Hereafter, may we serve our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

Let us say the prayer Jesus gave 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.

Our next hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1742 as part of a section entitled, "After a Recovery from Backsliding". It was originally eighteen verses long and was printed in its current form as late as 1904. They must have sung fewer hymns, or had longer services in those days! We shall sing hymn number 436, 'What shall I do my God to love'.

- 1. What shall I do my God to love,
My loving God to praise?
The length, and breadth, and height to prove,
And depth of sovereign grace?**
- 2. Your sovereign grace to all extends,
Immense and unconfined;
From age to age it never ends;
Enfolds all humankind.**
- 3. Throughout the world its breadth is known,
Wide as infinity;
So wide it never passed by one,
Or it had passed by me.**
- 4. My trespass was grown up to heaven;
But, far above the skies,
In Christ abundantly forgiven,
I see your mercies rise.**
- 5. The depth of all-redeeming love
What angel tongue can tell?
O may I to the utmost prove
The gift unspeakable!**
- 6. Come quickly, gracious Lord, and take
Possession of your own;
My longing heart vouchsafe to make
Your everlasting throne.**

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

God most gracious and holy, thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout lockdown and which we are confident will bring us through this time of trial. Help us to reveal the light of your love in our daily lives, so we can lighten some of the darkness that has enveloped the world by caring for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion so we may serve as you call us to, but in many circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, this church, the other churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Help your Church as it begins to open its churches and as it plans for the ending of lockdown, for many are facing serious issues that have arisen during the past six months. Help us all to share the Good News, united in words and deeds, so we reveal Christ as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

Lord of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for peace around the world where acts of war, terrorism and persecution cause so many deaths, so much destruction and despair. Inspire the leaders of the nations of his world to rule wisely and compassionately, to seek justice and peace, rather than resorting to violence when they cannot have their way. We pray especially for an end to conflict in countries such as Syria, Libya, Belarus and Sudan. Compassionate God, help resolve situations that seem hopeless and let your love overcome the hatred in human hearts. We pray for an end of grievous oppression of black people in the USA, as we examine our consciences about the treatment of minority groups in this country, too.

Lord of shalom, or wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Let them feel your presence in their need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout the treatment they receive. Gracious God, reach out to people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, especially in these stressful times. Comfort them in their distress, reassure them when they are confused and let them feel loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, hear our prayer for neighbours who are lonely, afraid, overworked, unemployed, for whom lockdown has strained their relationship to breaking point, or who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one when funerals are so constrained that comfort is almost impossible to achieve. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will reach out to them.

Lord, we ask you help us to offer them practical support and friendship and that you will hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and enduring peace.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe in their duties and help them to successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccine that works. Help us to patiently observe guidelines laid down by the Government, even though we may find them difficult and confusing. Dispel scepticism and reckless behaviour in parts of the country where tighter restrictions have been imposed, so that, by obeying the rules, the rate of infection is controlled and help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

Lord of all mercies, hear our plea for the victims of recent natural disasters, especially the wildfires in the USA. We pray for everybody involved that they can receive effective aid as soon as possible.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead Christ-centred lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a broken and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Martin Leckebusch was born into a Methodist family in 1962, but having worshipped with Methodist, Anglican and Pentecostal churches, he is now an elder at a Baptist church in Gloucester, Martin writes that "intelligent discipleship means applying unchanging truth to a changing world in a way which will genuinely honour God". Let us sing hymn number 429, 'Lord, we turn to you for mercy:'

**1. Lord, we turn to you for mercy:
May our prayerful words express
Something of our heartfelt sorrow
For the sins we now confess.**

**2. We have trusted far too often
In our human strength and skill;
We have proudly disregarded
What we knew to be your will.**

**3. Yet by your immense compassion
You invite, accept, restore,
Leading us to greater wholeness
Than we ever knew before.**

**4. Your forgiveness lifts our burdens,
Setting heart and spirit free
To fulfil our true potential,
All that we were meant to be.**

**5. For you teach a way of wisdom
We may clearly understand:
Walking with the God of mercy
Step by step, and hand in hand.**

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The Old Testament reading is Jonah chapter 3 verse 10 to chapter 4 verse 11

When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened. But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?"

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said,

“It would be better for me to die than to live.”

But God said to Jonah,

“Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?”

“I do,” he said. “I am angry enough to die.”

But the LORD said,

“You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 20 verses 1 to 16

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He told them,

‘You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went.

He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them,

‘Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?’

‘Because no one has hired us,’ they answered.

He said to them,

‘You also go and work in my vineyard.’

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.’ The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner.

‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’

But he answered one of them,

‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Amen.

Our next hymn was written by John Newton, an ex-slave trading captain, who was converted to Christ when “They Greyhound”, the ship he was travelling home in was nearly swamped in a terrible storm. John Newton retired to his quarters in terror and read “The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas a Kempis. He not only gave up the trade but became a priest in the Church of England and helped William Wilberforce to have slavery abolished. It is hardly surprising that his most popular hymn is “Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –”. Hymn number 440.

1. Amazing grace – how sweet the sound –

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now I’m found -

Was blind, but now I see.

2. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

3. Thro' many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

4. The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

5. When we've been there a thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

© John Newton {1725 – 1807} v. 5 John Rees

Sermon: “*Are you envious because I am generous?*” Mt. 20:15

The Victorians developed an interesting concept to deal with the Poor Law Reform Act, namely the ‘**Worthy Poor**’ and the ‘**Unworthy Poor**’. The idea was that you helped the former, by providing enough money to tide them over a difficult period and punished the latter by admitting them into the workhouse, where husbands were separated from wives and parents from children. There are strong feelings today when pensioners in England and Wales have to pay the full cost of their nursing or residential care, if they need to go into a home, if they have assets greater than £23500, whilst those who don't, or who live in Scotland, have their costs paid by the State. To be fair, the State will pay everybody's fees once their assets fall to £23500. Some people think the system is unjust, claiming it does not credit the thrifty and seems to favour those who have squandered their wages, on tobacco, drink, gambling and foreign holidays, or whatever else they disapprove of. Whilst they may accept that the Government can hardly leave the ‘**unworthy poor**’ destitute, they'd barely tolerate my argument that, if you have enough money to be charged, at least you have some control where you live, unlike the penniless, for they will argue that those who have made no provision for their retirement are less worthy than the prudent, in which case our parable may be as great a challenge to us as it was to the disciples.

Jesus was answering Peter's question, “**We have left everything to follow you. What then will there be for us?**” He reassured them that all who followed him would receive far more than they gave up, besides which they'd inherit eternal life, but he added, “**But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.**” Christ did so because, even at its inception, the Church was developing a ‘**pecking-order**’, with followers disputing one another's relative value to the faith. Indeed, when Matthew wrote his gospel primarily for Jewish Christians living in Palestine, or most probably at Antioch in Syria, the community was clearly divided along lines of both their background and the time for they had been Christians. Thus, Jews who had already been followers when the church was formed deemed themselves superior to Jews who had converted after the founding of the church and all felt worthier than Gentile converts, who had no Jewish heritage to boast of. Try to put yourselves in the Gentiles' shoes, by thinking back to our schooldays when two captains chose teams from the rest of the class, lined up for the purpose. I stopped the practice when I was a teacher,

because you could see the humiliation in the eyes of the last few children to be chosen – often with ill-disguised contempt from the captains and the favoured players. Nobody thrives if he or she feels unwelcome, or undervalued.

The parable is straightforward enough: the vineyard owner hired men at several times of the day, **at the standard rate of a denarius – the amount due for a day's work**. Presumably, there was much work to do and the owner wanted it done urgently. When he went to the marketplace at 5 p.m., the vineyard owner was aware that those he was choosing were not the best of workers, otherwise they would have been employed by other vineyard owners, yet he invited them to help finish off the harvesting. It was only when the labourers were paid that problems arose, for the men called at daybreak expected a greater reward than those who came with only a couple of hours to spare; yet everybody received a denarius – enough to allow a man to feed his family the next day.

Naturally, there was some grumbling from the first groups of labourers, for they had sweated for more than twelve hours, but had only received the same amount as those who'd worked just a couple of hours. Now before you rush to judgement, remember that each group was offered a denarius for its labour, so the owner cheated nobody. Indeed, as he told his workers, **“Don't I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?”**

The moral of this parable is this: **God loves us equally, irrespective of our background, or the time we have served him – BECAUSE HE LOVES EACH OF US TO THE UTMOST**. This is what grace is all about. There is nothing we can do to make God love us a jot more or less than he does already. When Jesus died at Calvary, he died for everybody, not solely for an exclusive group, so that all are open to his call to follow him.

Our reading from Jonah shows how Jews recognised God's universal grace, for Jonah was frustrated when God spared the Ninevites – Assyrians were loathed by the Jews – whilst he sat outside waiting for the city's destruction. The plant beneath which he was sheltering then withered away, making him to grow angry as the sun beat down upon him. God told him, **“This plant grew up in one night and disappeared the next; you didn't do anything for it, and you didn't make it grow—yet you feel sorry for it! How much more, then, should I have pity on Nineveh, that great city. After all, it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!”** Eight hundred years after this Book was written, Jesus commanded his disciples – and us – **‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.’**

God's own Son did not set himself up above us: indeed, he reached out to sinners, people who were considered unclean, to Gentiles – even to the Samaritans who Jews hated with a passion. Christ's life demonstrates how he treats everybody as important – indicating God's will for us to adopt the same attitude.

We are challenged to be open-minded in the way we stand up for the rights of all people, setting aside our prejudices. We may not approve of asylum-seekers, or of people trafficked to form casual labour under the **Gangmaster system**, despite recent tightening of legislation, but God doesn't ask our approval when he calls us to fight for controls to be made to protect them from being exploited – even put in mortal danger – as happens to asylum-seekers navigating their way across the English Channel in barely seaworthy inflatable boats. We may feel weary of contributing to Christian Aid, or other relief agencies – perhaps blaming people in the Developing World for having many children when there is a famine, even though contraception may not be available.

Moreover, as these lands have no provision for the elderly, children are the only means of future support that their parents will have. Rabbi Hillel said that before we judge another person, we should walk a mile in his or her shoes. When we consider the desperate lives of refugees and our brothers and sisters in the Developing World, I am sure walking in their shoes would be more than we could bear. If you still aren't convinced why we should care for the poor and outcast, just think how often we ask God to forgive us, day in, day out. Where would we be, if he grew too weary to shower us with his grace? May God grant each of us love like his that cares for all human beings, irrespective of their background and lifestyles. Amen.

“For the love of God is broader / Than the measures of the mind; / And the heart of the Eternal / Is most wonderfully kind. // 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.” We conclude our worship as we sing a lovely hymn by Frederick Faber. Number 416, ‘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}*

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.