

A service for 21st August, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 103 verses 1 to 8

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.

Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody, like many of their hymns. We sing the first three verses of hymn 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.

© John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (born 1958)

In our opening prayer, when I say, 'Amazing God', please respond with, 'We praise your holy Name'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you not only broke the power of death, but reconciled sinners like us to you.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you bought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and to atone for the sins of the world.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Holy Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into our discipleship.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. We ask you to hear and accept our praise and worship.

Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'Forgive and restore us'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for everyone who guides, inspires and loves us, but most of all for your undying love, even we are loveless and faithless. Forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving or judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'Forgive and restore us'.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-ignite the embers of our faith, to a holy flame, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'Forgive and restore us'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more without the burden of our sins. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

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 Bryn Rees, a Congregational Minister who served mainly in Eastern and South Eastern England. It has four common settings, which makes it an organist's nightmare. However, the melody favoured by "singing the Faith", 'Tetherdown', was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister. We shall sing hymn 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}

In our prayers of intercession, we bring our concern for people nearby and far away unto the Lord. Let us pray.

Loving God, although the world in which we live is wonderful and self-sustaining, the news in our Media speaks of its brokenness and is often so gloomy it daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify the results of mankind's cruelty, folly, exploitation and indifference which result in so much suffering around the world.

God of shalom, we grieve about the number of conflicts around the world, especially at present, conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Guide the leaders of all nations to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, rather than resorting to war. Warm and mould their hearts so they seek justice and mercy in their dealings so that lasting peace can be built on solid foundations.

In your mercy Lord, may a negotiated peace be established soon between Russia and Ukraine: one that enables Ukraine to continue as an independent democracy. Grant President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, the steadfast courage, wisdom and resources to resist Russia's might and frustrate the Kremlin's plans. Most of all, merciful God, hear our prayer for civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces. Enfold them in your care that they may be comforted and protected. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees. Grant then a warm welcome from host nations and generous hospitality to ease their distress.

Lord our provider, we pray for organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. May the relaxing of the blockade of Ukraine's ports allow the export of much-needed grain and oil to these countries.

We remember, too, people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which help the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government, business leaders, charities and local councils find ways of helping all who are finding it difficult to manage.

God of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. Heavenly Father, in a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.

..... Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love which offers comfort, healing, courage and peace that passes all understanding.

Holy Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities, as we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission and may the Spirit of truth and love help us bear the gospel light to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

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 10 to 17

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people,

"There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." The Lord answered him,

"You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. 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 the heart of the Eternal / Is most wonderfully kind."
Inspired words by Revd. Frederick Faber, an Anglican priest who followed John Henry Newman into the Catholic Church, worked with Revd. Newman at the Oratory in Edgbaston and, when they fell out, Revd. Faber founded Brompton Oratory, which the Cardinal described sniffily as 'distinctly second-rate'. John Newman has since been canonized, but even saints are allowed off-days! Hymn 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}

Sermon: *“There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” Luke 13:14*
In Isaiah chapter fifty-eight, the prophet offered comfort to Judeans who had returned after exile in Babylon and who were growing increasingly disheartened in the task of rebuilding the temple, particularly after they refused the help of Samaritans who had occupied the land during the exile and who Judeans regarded as renegades. As a result, the Samaritans attacked them, so much of the Judeans’ energy was diverted into fighting off their attackers, rather than rebuilding the temple. Isaiah declared that God would hear and answer their prayers for help, provided they kept their part of the covenant. **“You will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I”**. The great work of rebuilding Jerusalem and its temple would be achieved with the Lord’s help, but only if his people remained true. There was to be no more of the rituals of token worship which the first Isaiah had condemned: it was no use pretending to be a holy people by Sabbath observance and sacrifice, if they oppressed, humiliated and slandered others, for God will not be fooled. No, Isaiah called for them to show compassion and justice in their dealings with the poor and downtrodden, for, as he said, **‘then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday’**. In Hebrew, Isaiah was calling for **Chesed – lovingkindness and Mishpat – justice**, which if fulfilled will produce **Shalom** – peace, harmony, well-being, prosperity, rest, indeed, the fullness of God’s blessing.

Isaiah continued that the people must not dishonour the Sabbath, but should keep it holy, so we can see that, at first glance, Jesus’ healing on his last recorded visit to a synagogue would have been controversial. Jesus saw a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years by a condition that one of my commentaries assures us was **‘spondylitis deformans’** – where the bones of the spine have been fused into a rigid, bent, mass! I don’t think Jesus would have been any more impressed by the name of her condition than I was; he saw a woman, not only in pain, but no doubt looked down on by fellow-worshippers as somebody afflicted because of her misdeeds, for disease and deformities were considered God’s judgement for one’s own or one’s forebears’ sinfulness. Indeed, she may have been admitted to a synagogue, but her deformity would have prevented her from worshiping at the temple. Jesus called her forward, told her that she was free of her infirmity and laid hands on her, as a result of which the woman regained her mobility and praised God. Don’t forget, this would have happened either at the start of, or even during the morning worship. Moreover, the woman would have had to enter the men’s section of the synagogue and was touched by Jesus, breaking two more taboos, inevitably enraging the synagogue ruler, who probably felt his own importance diminished by what had just occurred.

The synagogue ruler spoke to the congregation, rather than to Jesus directly: **“There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”** Jesus responded by calling him a hypocrite on two grounds. He had not had the courage to direct his criticism directly at Jesus and he had professed zeal for the **Fourth Commandment** by objecting to an act of mercy – **chesed** – that fulfilled both the spirit and purpose of the law. Jesus went on to observe that everybody present would still attend to their animals’ welfare on the Sabbath, provided they led them to the trough and did not carry them and on condition that they drew and poured the water into the trough and did not hold a bucket for the animals to drink from. In other words, they observed the spirit of the law by showing compassion to their animals, so Jesus argued that it was surely more justified to show mercy to **‘a daughter of Abraham’** who had been a prisoner of the evil of her condition for eighteen years. When convention worked against people’s interests, Christ challenged it.

When he was born in 1801, Anthony Cooper might have been considered lucky, because his father, Lord Shaftesbury, was a wealthy land-owner and an important member of the House of Lords. However, neither of Anthony’s parents had time for him, for they were too keen on drinking and fancy parties to care, so he was sent away to Harrow public school. There he saw a pauper’s funeral which changed his life. A party of drunken men staggered along the road, laughing and singing as they carried the coffin on their shoulders. They were so drunk that they even fell over and dropped the coffin, before they climbed unsteadily to their feet and continued towards the cemetery, uttering profanities. At fourteen Anthony decided to devote his life to improving the conditions of the poor in this country.

When he became a M.P. at twenty-five, many people expected him to have a glittering social career like his parents, but they were in for a surprise. He investigated the conditions in which children worked. He was appalled by the cruelty and avoidable accidents, so he campaigned for laws that would protect them. He dryly observed that slaves in the West Indies were expected to work for 11½ hours a day, but poor children in the United Kingdom were fortunate if they only worked a twelve-hour day – often in more dangerous and harsher conditions. It was not a popular cause, because opponents declared that if his reforms became law, the whole fabric of industrial society would be destroyed. Anthony Cooper was bitterly opposed by not only factory owners, mine owners, chimney sweeps who made boys climb up chimneys and mill owners, but by the gentry, especially the House of Lords. His parents opposed him so strongly that his father cut off his allowance as long as he fought for the rights of the poor. This was a severe blow, for MPs in the mid-1800s received no pay, so he had to rely upon his own small income to scrape a living. Nevertheless, he rejected conventional views and changed the attitudes of many fellow MPs.

Later, when he became Lord Shaftesbury after the death of his father, he won support from many noble lords. Lord Shaftesbury devoted fifty years in Parliament to serving the poor, powerless and forgotten of our land. He is usually remembered for ending child labour, working against slavery in British territories, for trying to improve housing in our industrial towns and for laying the foundations for children to receive an education by being President of the Ragged Schools’ Union for thirty-nine years.

Christ challenges us to stand up and work for justice and mercy. This means looking at our traditions and attitudes. Do we allow convention to rule our attitudes to others, or are we willing to take a chance, to be open-minded enough to break the shackles of oppression, if by so-doing we offer shalom to somebody in need? May our light rise in the darkness of this world, for it is the light of Christ’s love, to which those

for whom we are called to care may be drawn and through which they will be saved.
Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by Jacqueline Jones that challenges us. Jacqui is a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the UK for 5 years and now lives in Christchurch, NZ as a 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, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.