

**A service for Lent 5 – 21<sup>st</sup> March, 2021 (StF)**

**Call to worship: Psalm 145 verses 8 to 13**

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. They will tell of the glory of your kingdom and speak of your might, so that all people may know of your mighty acts and the glorious splendour of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations. The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. Amen.

*Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn sung to 'Abbots Leigh', but we shall sing it to Henry Smart's 'Bethany'. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'.*

**1. God is here! As we his people  
Meet to offer praise and prayer,  
May we find in fuller measure  
What it is in Christ we share.**

**Here, as in the world around us,  
All our varied skills and arts  
Wait the coming of the Spirit  
Into open minds and hearts.**

**2. Here are symbols to remind us  
Of our lifelong need of grace;  
Here are table, font and pulpit;  
Here the cross has central place.  
Here in honesty of preaching,  
Here in silence, as in speech,  
Here in newness and renewal,  
God the Spirit comes to each.**

**3. Here our children find a welcome  
In the Shepherd's flock and fold:  
Here as bread and wine are taken,  
Christ sustains us, as of old.  
Here the servants of the Servant  
Seek in worship to explore  
What it means in daily living  
To believe and to adore.**

**4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,  
In an age of change and doubt,  
Keep us faithful to the gospel,  
Help us work your purpose out.  
Here, in this day's dedication,  
All we have to give, receive:  
We, who cannot live without you,  
We adore you! We believe!**

***Let us pray.***

Creator God, who spoke life into our universe, we acknowledge your sovereignty and holiness as we come before your throne of grace to worship and adore you. Faithful, loving Son, our Saviour and Friend, we acknowledge your sovereignty and holiness as we come before your throne of grace to worship and adore you. Sacred Spirit, our counsellor, comforter and source of power, we acknowledge your sovereignty and holiness as we come before your throne of grace to worship and adore you. Amazing God, three persons in one, bless us as we come to you now.

Lord of all, we offer praise and thanksgiving for everything you do for us and give us, besides all the good things we enjoy, but most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are loveless and unlovable and when we fail to live as you call us to.

Merciful Lord, forgive us for not loving and serving you wholeheartedly, for our failure to love others as we would like to be loved, for the sins we have committed and the good we've neglected to do. Help us to amend our ways and to follow the path Christ Jesus calls us to walk.

Amazing God, you hear and answer our prayer, offering not only your pardon, but inviting us to follow you once more. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so by serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully we may bring you glory in Jesus' lovely name. 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 by Dave Bilbrough, who at fourteen accepted an invitation to attend church. He valued the questions posed by some of Paul Simon's songs, and even more the evangelistic challenge at the church's youth group and became a Christian a year later. He learnt to play guitar, and, encouraged by Nick Butterworth, began to write new songs which could break the traditional mould. In 1991 he became a music leader with Chris Bowater and Noel Richards and has travelled internationally, conducted seminars, written 3 books and some 200 worship songs. We shall sing hymn number 553, 'I am a new creation'.*

**I am a new creation,  
No more in condemnation,  
Here in the grace of God I stand.  
My heart is overflowing,  
My love just keeps on growing,  
Here in the grace of God I stand.  
And I will praise you, Lord,  
Yes, I will praise you, Lord,  
And I will sing of all that you have done:  
A joy that knows no limit,  
A lightness in my spirit –  
Here in the grace of God I stand.**

***We come now to our prayers of intercession. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond, 'hear our prayer'. Let us pray.***

Sovereign God, Light of the world, you are our strength and refuge in times of trouble. You bless us with your love, so, we turn to you, asking you to help us to act as your earthly hands by helping neighbours who are in need or any kind of trouble. Although our own powers are limited and, at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with power and influence, who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible. *'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Lord of the outsider and marginalised, hear our prayer for people who face problems of addiction, debt, unemployment, or homelessness. Grant them practical support but also open their hearts and minds, so that they have the good judgement and courage to accept such help that is offered them to overcome their problems.

*'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Lord of the poor, vulnerable and overlooked, we bring your concern for people who lack resources, for whom life is a struggle to survive. Enable us to fulfil our mission to help them through the ministries of our churches and organisations who serve the poor, here and abroad. Guide this church and the World Church throughout this pandemic, so we may reveal the light of your love to people for whom life is shadowed by want. *'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Lord of all, guide and inspire the leaders of the nations to seek justice and to deal mercifully with their peoples, for only when justice and mercy prevail will lasting peace be forged. We pray for real peace, for an end to conflicts and terrorism that cause not only injury death and destruction, but swell the number of refugees who are seeking to escape from terror and suffering. Lord, help all victims of warfare, persecution and terrorism not only to rebuild their broken lives, but to enjoy the support of their host communities.

*'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on those we know who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. May they find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only by receiving good care and support, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them.

Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and guide them through the uncharted waters of dementia. Above all else, let all of them feel loved and valued even in the midst of the difficulties cause by COVID19.

*'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Remember, too, our neighbours who are lonely, overworked, undervalued or unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, especially those whose lives have been taken by this wretched virus. In a time of silence, we bring to you the names of people for whom we are particularly concerned. ....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, in which they may experience healing, courage, comfort and peace.

*'Lord, in your mercy,' ..... 'hear our prayer'.*

Sovereign Lord, encourage the Government and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic whether or not they are popular or politically expedient. We ask a special blessing upon the NHS, scientists and keyworkers, as they strive to heal us and to keep us safe throughout this crisis. We pray

for school staff as children return to their classrooms. Help them cope with the enormous demands that are being put upon them and protect them in their work.

*'Lord, in your mercy, '.....'hear our prayer'.*

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. May your Holy Spirit unite us in love and mission, so that through our words and actions everybody may come to believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world. Amen.

*The author of our next hymn, Robert Walmsley was born on 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1831 in Manchester and was raised as a Congregationalist. He became a jeweller in his native city and was an active Sunday School teacher. It was in this role that he wrote a number of hymns for the special Whitsuntide celebrations, including this one. Hymn number 443, 'Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,'*

**1. Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,**

**Tender and true;**

**Out of the heart of the Father above,**

**Streaming to me and to you;**

**Wonderful love**

**Dwells in the heart of the Father above.**

**2. Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,**

**Joyfully came;**

**Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,**

**Sharing their sorrow and shame;**

**Seeking the lost,**

**Saving, redeeming at measureless cost.**

**3. Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;**

**Why do they roam?**

**Love only waits to forgive and forget;**

**Home, weary wanderer, home!**

**Wonderful love**

**Dwells in the heart of the Father above.**

**4. Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,**

**Come and abide,**

**Lifting my life, till it rises above**

**Envy and falsehood and pride,**

**Seeking to be**

**Lowly and humble, a learner of thee.**

© Robert Walmsley {1831 – 1905}

**Our gospel reading is Luke chapter 19 verses 1 to 10**

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him,

"Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner'." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord,

"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him,

"Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Amen.

*We continue our worship as we sing a hymn written by a Baptist lay preacher, Allan Dickinson, in 1993, for the church in Cardiff where he worshipped. Allan said that this text arose from a particular reflection on the incarnation of Jesus. It spoke of Jesus as being with and "for" the marginalised of society – "the poor, the homeless, the people that respectable people wouldn't touch with a barge pole". At the same time, Allan heard a sermon that argued that, as Christians, we shouldn't wait for people to "come through the doors to us". Instead, we should go out to them – for that is where Christ is today. The Churches Together Shop in Cardiff's Maelfa Shopping Arcade offers the kind of practical Christian outreach that Allan Dickinson wrote about in this hymn. Hymn number 672, 'Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?'*

**1. Where can we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?**

**We want to serve you, to answer your call.**

**Where do you lead us and ask us to follow?**

**What should we do in our service to all?**

**2. 'Go to the hungry, to those who have nothing;**

**Go where the farmlands are empty and bare.**

**I broke the bread for the people around me;**

**Out of my plenty, think what you can share.**

**3. 'Go to the homeless, to those who have nowhere;**

**Go where my people sleep out in the rain.**

**I had no comforts but what others gave me;**

**Offer them shelter, give ease to their pain.**

**4. 'Go to the outcast, to those who have no-one;**

**Go where my sheep are rejected and lost.**

**I dined with sinners and reached out to lepers;**

**Go and do likewise, and don't count the cost.'**

**Where will we find you, Lord Jesus our Master?**

**We are your servants who answer your call.**

**You go before us, and there we will follow,**

**Taking our cross in the service of all.**

© Allan Charles Dickinson (b. 1954)

**Sermon: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Luke 19:10**

There is a word in Hebrew, **chesed**, that is often translated as mercy, but it is better rendered as loving-kindness, for although we know Jesus has a special concern for the poor and marginalised, his loving-kindness is extended to the wealthy, too, as our reading about Zacchaeus illustrated. In material terms Zacchaeus had more or less everything he needed, for Luke tells us that he was a chief tax-collector, so he would have received taxes from other collectors. The occupying Romans required a set amount from Zacchaeus, but the minor collectors were in the habit of taking more than

they needed to, pocketing the difference. In turn, Zacchaeus would have taken his share of the spoils and passed on the required amount to Rome. Yes, he was a very rich man, but he had no peace of mind, for he was reviled by everybody.

It is hardly surprising that tax-collectors were despised by the Jews, for they not only collaborated with a state that had occupied their land, but even cheated their own people. Taxmen were labelled sinners, so they were completely ostracized by the community. They would not have been welcome at a synagogue; nor would 'respectable' Jews have entered their house to eat. Whilst the Romans would have protected tax-collectors – after all, they were raising money for the Empire – they would have scorned Zacchaeus as an unpatriotic opportunist.

Jesus met Zacchaeus when he was travelling through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Now Zacchaeus has two possible meanings: '**innocent**' or '**Israelite**'. I think it is unlikely, but if we take Zacchaeus to mean innocent, some commentators claim that Luke was saying that he already gave to the poor, but did so secretly, despite which he was hated by his neighbours, unlike the rich young ruler, who found it impossible to give away his possessions to follow Jesus. I prefer to think Zacchaeus was an unrepentant rogue until he met Jesus, because that makes his transformation all the more remarkable.

The story tells us that Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but was short in stature and could not push his way through the crowd which would have delighted in obstructing the tax-collector and seeing him frustrated. In desperation, he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree, which would have cost him much in terms of lost dignity. You can almost hear the crowd chuckling at the sight.

Despite the press of the multitude around him, Jesus saw the wealthy tax-collector and told him to come down from the tree, because he **must** stay at his house that day. Although this was more a command than a self-invitation, Zacchaeus recognized that Jesus had seen something other than the public image within him, for our Lord had accepted him just as he was and was offering him a new start, so he received Jesus with great joy.

Needless to say, many in the crowd began to mutter in a self-righteous way, "**He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'**" While Jesus made no immediate response, Zacchaeus did. He declared, "**Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.**" By doing so, not only did Zacchaeus make an extraordinary donation to the poor, but he followed Roman law, which required repayment of four times the amount one had defrauded someone. He had exceeded Jewish law which required only the amount misappropriated plus a fifth more, so he was showing a real change of heart as a result of his acceptance by Jesus.

Notice that Zacchaeus neither asked for forgiveness; nor did Jesus formally forgive him. Instead, Zacchaeus' actions, his turning away from his former practices, fulfilled what God requires of us all, for his seeking to act justly was enhanced by his generosity – loving-kindness – to those he had wronged. You could argue that, by making himself Zacchaeus' guest, Jesus had effectively forgiven the tax-collector's sins as an act of grace, so Zacchaeus' declaration was a response to the loving-kindness, the grace, of our Lord. As a result, Jesus declared that Zacchaeus was '**a son of Abraham**', not just born a Jew, but following the faith of Abraham, through which he and his household had been saved. It seems likely that Jesus was playing upon the second meaning of Zacchaeus, namely '**an Israelite**'?

In what way can we learn from today's readings? In our society there are many people who are compartmentalized and rejected, especially by the Media and politicians. Asylum-seekers, refugees, immigrants, travellers, the unemployed, Moslems, even bankers – all of these groups are regularly criticised, if not demonised. Are we as open-minded as Jesus was? Do we see some of our neighbours as part of society's problems, as a group label, or do we see them as individuals with their own hopes, fears and needs? Jesus saw Zacchaeus as an individual, wishing to be accepted, needing a fresh start, not as a cheating collaborator who lived off the backs of decent, hard-working people and deserved only ill. By accepting him as an individual, Jesus brought about a real change in a man who might otherwise have continued to live as he had done for years – on the margins of society.

We are challenged to be open-minded and to resist the temptation to close our hearts to people whom society has marginalized, because as with Zacchaeus, Jesus has invited himself into our lives and has called each of us to be a follower. If we accept Christ's challenge, discipleship means more than coming to church, if that means no more than empty rituals of asking for forgiveness and of praising him. Instead, he calls us to stand up for mishpat – social justice, to care for the poor and vulnerable – here and abroad. Jesus said, **'the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.'** We can do no less than to share the greatest gift we possess – the loving-kindness that God bestows upon us in abundance and which reached its zenith on that cross at Calvary! It is just as pointless for us to tell others that God is love if our lives do not reflect it, as it was for leading Pharisees to make great show of worship rituals when their daily lives were a denial of all God stands for. **Live to love, confident that the more you give away, the more you will receive from the Lord. Amen.**

*We close with a hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community.  
Hymn number 673, 'Will you come and follow me'.*

**1. Will you come and follow me**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you go where you don't know**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you let my love be shown,**

**Will you let my name be known,**

**Will you let my life be grown**

**In you, and you in me?**

**2. Will you leave yourself behind**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you care for cruel and kind**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you risk the hostile stare**

**Should your life attract or scare,**

**Will you let me answer prayer**

**In you, and you in me?**

**3. Will you let the blinded see**

**If I but call your name?**

**Will you set the pris'ners free,**

**And never be the same?**

**Will you kiss the leper clean**

**And do such as this unseen,**

And admit to what I mean  
In you, and you in me?

4. Will you love the 'you' you hide  
If I but call your name?  
Will you quell the fear inside,  
And never be the same?  
Will you use the faith you've found  
To reshape the world around  
Through my sight and touch and sound  
In you, and you in me?

5. Lord, your summons echoes true  
When you but call my name.  
Let me turn and follow you,  
And never be the same.  
In your company I'll go  
Where your love and footsteps show.  
Thus, I'll move and live and grow  
In you, and you in me.

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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.