

**A service for 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 2023 (StF)**

**Call to worship: Psalm 96 verses 1 to 3**

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by Revd. Henry Francis Lyte in 1834 and is his version of Psalm 103. He wanted to write something that he could leave behind to 'live to the glory of God'; a hymn that would not be ephemeral. Certainly, two of his hymns, this one and 'Abide with me', have stood the test of time. We shall sing hymn number 83, 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven'.*

**1. Praise, my soul, the King of heaven;  
To his feet thy tribute bring;  
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
Who like thee his praise shall sing?  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Praise the everlasting King!**

**2. Praise him for his grace and favour  
To our fathers in distress;  
Praise him still, the same for ever,  
Slow to chide, and swift to bless.  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Glorious in his faithfulness.**

**3. Father-like, he tends and spares us;  
Well our feeble frame he knows;  
In His hands he gently bears us,  
Rescues us from all our foes.  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Widely as his mercy flows.**

**4. Angels in the height, adore him,  
Ye behold him face to face;  
Sun and moon, bow down before him,  
Dwellers all in time and space.  
Praise him! Praise him!  
Praise with us the God of grace!**

© Henry Francis Lyte {1793 – 1847}

**Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.**

Almighty God all glory and praise are yours forever, for you are the Living Word who spoke our universe into being, who formed this world and all that lives upon it. It is you who created mankind and entrusted the stewardship of the earth to our care. Faithful God, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and provide our daily needs. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers and a conscience to discern between right and wrong. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

Gracious God, you know everything about us: our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, our hopes and fears and yet you love us so much that you came to live among us as Christ Jesus, so by his life and teaching, we might understand how you want us live and through his death and resurrection, our Lord broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled by your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in love, spirit and truth. Almighty God all glory and praise are yours forever. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you and, most of all for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we should. In Jesus' precious name, help us to lead Christ-centred, rather than self-centred lives, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Loving Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. Help us serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

***Let us say the prayer our Lord taught 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.**

*In his short life – he died of tuberculosis aged only thirty - Joachim Neander was one of leading hymn-writers of the German Reformed Church. Incidentally, he gave his name to the Neanderthal, a valley near Dusseldorf – where early human remains were found. Our next hymn was translated from German by the then Poet Laureate, Robert Bridges, whose “Yattendon Hymnal” led to the 1906 “English Hymnal” – a rival of the great “Hymns Ancient and Modern. We shall sing hymn number 455, ‘All my hope on God is founded,’*

**1. All my hope on God is founded;  
He doth still my trust renew.  
Me through change and chance he guideth,  
Only good and only true.  
God unknown, he alone  
Calls my heart to be his own.**

**2. Mortal pride and earthly glory,  
Sword and crown betray our trust;  
What with care and toil we build them,  
Tower and temple fall to dust.  
But God's power, hour by hour,  
Is my temple and my tower.**

**3. God's great goodness aye endureth,  
Deep his wisdom passing thought;  
Splendour, light, and life attend him,  
Beauty springeth out of nought.  
Evermore from his store**

Newborn worlds rise and adore.

4. Daily doth the almighty giver  
Bounteous gifts on us bestow;  
His desire our soul delighteth,  
Pleasure leads us where we go.  
Love doth stand at his hand;  
Joy doth wait on his command.

5. Still from earth to God eternal  
Sacrifice of praise be done,  
High above all praises praising  
For the gift of Christ, his son.  
Christ doth call one and all;  
Ye who follow shall not fall.

© Robert Bridges {1844 – 1930} & Joachim Neander {1650 – 1680}

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for its needs. When I say 'Your kingdom come', please respond with, 'Your will be done'. Let us pray.***

God most gracious and holy, thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout our lives and as a result, we offer ourselves to serve you in whatever ways we can. We pray for the compassion, wisdom, courage and steadfastness required to serve well and, in situations that are beyond our powers, we ask you to intervene, for all things are possible to you.

Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost as a result of the attack by Hamas in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting. Remember in your mercy people who have been injured, for those taken as hostages and ordinary civilians trapped in Gaza with nowhere to flee. We pray for an end not only to this war, but to all conflicts around the world. May lasting peace be established; peace based upon justice and mercy and may the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and discrimination receive the practical and emotional support they need to rebuild their lives.

**'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.**

Heavenly King, we pray for the leaders of the world. Teach them to deal justly and mercifully, seeking peaceful resolutions when disagreements arise. Lead them in the ways of integrity, so they seek the well-being of all, rather than their vested interests.

**'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.**

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are affected by extreme weather. Remember victims of disasters and famines, thinking in particular of those affected by the earthquake in Morocco and the collapse of two dams in Libya in the past fortnight. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee. Grant them the resources they need for their relief work.

**'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.**

Lord of shalom, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we pray for people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and may you embrace them in your love, which offers healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for our church, the churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Grant us all the spiritual strength, energy, compassion, courage and vision to lead where you want the Church to go. May we proclaim good news boldly and find new ways of engaging our community.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the abundance of your love with all-comers. In Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

**Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 22 verses 15 to 22**

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians.

“Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s,” they replied.

Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. Amen.

***There is an epitaph on a wall at the church of St. Mary Woolnoth in London, inscribed thus: ‘John Newton, Clerk, Once an Infidel and Libertine, A servant of slaves in Africa, was by the mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ Preserved, Restored and Pardoned And appointed to preach the Faith he had so long laboured to destroy.’ If you want an example of how coming to know Christ can turn around a man’s life, look no further than John Newton: a foul-mouthed slave-trader to Anglican priest and one of the fiercest opponents of slavery! He became one of William Wilberforce’s strongest allies in the campaign to end slavery in British realms. This one of his hymns from “Olney Hymns”, which he and William Cowper wrote to rival Methodist hymnals. Let us sing hymn number 322, ‘How sweet the name of Jesus sounds’.***

**1. How sweet the name of Jesus sounds**

**In a believer’s ear!**

**It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,  
And drives away his fear.**

**2. It makes the wounded spirit whole,**

**And calms the troubled breast;**

**’Tis manna to the hungry soul, / And to the weary, rest.**

**3. Dear name – the rock on which I build,**

**My shield and hiding-place,**

**My never-failing treasury, filled**

With boundless stores of grace!

4. Jesus! My Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.

5. Weak is the effort of my heart,  
And cold my warmest thought;  
But when I see thee as thou art,  
I'll praise thee as I ought.

6. Till then I would thy love proclaim  
With every fleeting breath;  
And may the music of thy name  
Refresh my soul in death.

© John Newton (1725 – 1807)

Sermon: “*Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?*” Matthew 22:36.  
Shema Yisrael Adonai ‘Elohiym ‘echad Adonai – ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ Practising Jews recite this prayer, called the **Shema**, twice daily. Here is the first paragraph, which begins at Deuteronomy chapter 6 verse 4. ‘**Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.**’ Jews usually wear two **phylacteries** or **tefillin** when they worship. These are small boxes containing scrolls inscribed with scriptures, including the **Shema**. The first is strapped to their forehead, to remind them to love the Lord with all their mind; the second is strapped to their left arm, pointing toward the heart, as a reminder to love God wholeheartedly. A Jewish home has a **Mezuzah** attached to the right-hand side of every doorpost other than the bathroom and toilet. The Mezuzah is a box that holds a tiny parchment scroll upon which the Shema is written. Jews touch the Mezuzah each time they pass through a doorway.

Clearly, this commandment is dear to all Jews, but at the time of Jesus an intense and sometimes bitter debate was running about the greatest Commandment of all, with arguments about ‘**hard**’ and ‘**easy**’, or ‘**major**’ and ‘**minor**’ rules. In Luke’s gospel, the scribe was genuinely keen to hear Jesus’ view, but in our reading, the Pharisaic expert in Torah was trying to trap Jesus into publicly declaring that some commandments were less important than others, because he could then be accused of ‘**annulling the Law**’. Whilst Scribes and Pharisees debated in private, both groups taught that all commandments were wholly binding!

As with his judgement on tax-paying last week, Jesus’ answer was incisive and indisputable. He quoted the **Shema**, incidentally adding ‘**mind**’ to demand intellectual allegiance, and added **Leviticus 19 verse 18: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’** By choosing these quotations, Christ covered all the commandments, for the commandment to love God covers the first table of Mosaic Law and loving our neighbour covers the second. As Jesus said, “**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.**” St. Paul echoed this in his letter to the **Romans chapter 13**, when he wrote, ‘**The law says, “You must not be guilty of adultery. You must not murder anyone. You must not steal. You must not want to take your**

**neighbour's things." All these commands and all others are really only one rule: "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." Love never hurts a neighbour, so loving is obeying all the law.'**

For the past four weeks our readings have been about challenges to Jesus' authority after he arrived in Jerusalem prior to his passion and death and also his efforts to identify himself as the Messiah to his opponents. The parables about the **Two Sons, the Evil Vineyard Tenants, God's Banquet** and the **paying of Tribute to Caesar or God** are centred on Christ's response to his opponents. Today's lectionary reading shows Christ pointing out to the **Messiah being both human and divine**, not just a descendant of King David who was only human. After all, in **Psalm 110, King David declared, 'The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'** Therefore, Jesus' question of how King David could call his son, '**Lord**', was unanswerable, unless the Pharisees conceded that the Messiah was God in man, not simply a human descendant of David.

Although his opponents declined to answer Christ's question, it is clear that they would not move towards accepting him, so they fulfilled the teaching in his parables for the last month, because whilst they professed obedience to God, they lacked love in its full sense. They were more preoccupied by the minutiae of the **613 rules of Law** than the command to love God and their concept of '**neighbour**' had contracted to fellow-Hebrews, rather than all human beings.

The Greatest Commandment challenges each of us to ask whether or not our love for God and other people is wholehearted, or do we hold back from offering what the Lord would like from us? No act of kindness is too trivial for God to notice and bless it; nobody is beyond the reach of God's grace, however base their lives may appear. We are heirs of a creed that led early Methodists to offer practical support and hope in the Gospel message to people long-abandoned by 'respectable' members of the Church. They organized communities to support one another materially and spiritually – reaching out as Jesus did to the marginalized in society. By doing so, our forebears lifted many from squalor and hopelessness to fulfilled – Christ-filled lives.

Since I retired as a MHA chaplain, Carol and I have offered to help with tea, coffee and biscuits at some Citizens' Advice sessions at Brierley Hill Methodist Church and we are heart-broken by the numbers of people who are at their wits' end. Many clients are not unemployed, or long-term sick, but people who hold down two, occasionally three jobs, but who can't make ends meet. I understand, too, that there is a food bank at Russells Hall Hospital to help nurses manage and as for the Black Country Foodbank, it is often running on 'empty' because of the growing demand.

We have also become volunteers at the Dudley Parkinson's Support Group, (I hate retirement). When I was a chaplain, I was acutely aware of the stress and strain carers of people living with a dementia faced, but it is no easier for a carer of somebody with Parkinsons. It is not just dealing with issues that arise from the disease that cause ill-being, but a sense of isolation and hopelessness that breaks their spirit. We are going to add social gatherings to the activity classes to see if we can ease their plight, so they can let off steam and, hopefully, laugh and smile. It is not as much as we'd like to do, but it is the best we can offer at present. I know this church already reaches out to the community, but is there more we can do, however small it may be?

Our prayers of intercession illustrate the mess the world is in, but there is great brokenness in our country, too. Look around and we can see many people are in need and support at present: neighbours who are lonely, afraid, or suffering from long-COVID; people with job and financial worries, especially with rising inflation and

mortgage rates; neighbours whose relationships have broken down and others whose mental health has been deeply affected by the pandemic. We can't deal with all of these problems on our own, but that does not excuse us from trying to address one or more, either ourselves, or as a church – or as a Circuit! Our aim should be to help our neighbours, not to fill more seats in our churches. That may come, God-willing, but our support for neighbours should be our motivation. **Are we willing, as Twenty-First Century followers, to love our neighbours as our response to God's amazing grace? Amen.**

*We conclude our worship as we sing a hymn written in 1961 for the Blackburn Diocese by Canon Edward Burns – a real battle-cry for all of us. Hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim,'*

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,  
Good news for all throughout the earth;  
The gospel of a Saviour's name:  
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –  
Not in a royal house or hall,  
But in a stable, dark and dim,  
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:  
Hated by those he came to save,  
In lonely suffering on the cross,  
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;  
Empty the tomb, for he was free.  
He broke the power of death and hell  
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,  
By all creation glorified.  
He sends his Spirit on his church  
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:  
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.  
This gospel message we proclaim:  
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

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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 evermore. Amen.**