

A service for 22nd August, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 34 verses 8 & 9 (New Living Translation)

Taste and see that the LORD is good. Oh, the joys of those who trust in him! Let the LORD'S people show him reverence, for those who honour him will have all they need. Amen.

Our first hymn was written in 1993 by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations. We shall listen to hymn number 706,

'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,

Longing for truth, we turn to you.

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. *Chorus:*

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. *Chorus:*

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:*

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:*

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray

Lord of life, your Word transformed darkness and chaos into this vast swirling universe of stars, planets and moons. You not only created life but formed eco-systems which enable life to continue. Your wisdom and might are fathomless, so we are amazed that you reached out to feeble and flawed humankind, offering us guidance through the patriarchs and prophets. Even when we rebelled against your teaching and set ourselves in opposition to you, your love for us is so great that you did not abandon us, but instead took our mortal flesh and lived among us as Christ Jesus.

He came to show us how we should live fulfilled and holy lives by his words and actions, but he also came to bear the judgment for the sins of the whole world by becoming the one perfect sacrifice on a cross at Calvary.

By dying Jesus broke the power of sin and when he was raised, he offers us everlasting life as his great gift of grace, not something we can grasp by works, nor which we deserve. Death no longer has the final word. Lord, we come to worship you with joy and awe. May all honour, glory, power and praise be yours, now and for evermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say “Gracious God”, please respond with “have mercy on us”.

Lord, we have come to thank you for your gift of life, for this beautiful world in which we live, for the many good things we enjoy, for people who have guided, inspired and loved us, for experiences and opportunities that have delighted us, but above all things, thank you for being our Good Shepherd, for we know that even when we stray from you, when we are loveless and unlovable, you will seek us out and save us from our folly.

‘Gracious God’ ‘have mercy on us’.

Holy God, when we consider ourselves as straying sheep, we remember our failures to love and serve you wholeheartedly and to love our neighbours as we know we should. For the sins we have committed and the good we have neglected to do, forgive us O Lord and bring us back to you in our deeds and words, so we may be your holy people.

‘Gracious God’ ‘have mercy on us’.

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have already pardoned us. Lord God, teach us to share your gift of love with all-comers, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. 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.

We continue with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care.

He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. Hymn number 629, ‘God of my faith, I offer you my doubt’.

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
For life at times seems far too dark for me,
And my belief becomes more insecure,
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

**2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
When I am scared by my anxiety,
When all I hear is suffering and woe,
In all my shadows you will walk with me.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
When I sink down in sadness or despair,
When in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

**4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,
When I’m alone and feel nobody cares,**

**In aching age or in rejected youth,
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.**

**5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
Light in my life and all my life in you.**

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

In our prayers of intercession we think of people near and far away.

Heavenly Father, we offer praise and thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet on which we live. However, whenever we hear or read the news, we are reminded about the world's brokenness, much of which is the result of human failure, greed, cruelty, pride, foolishness, selfishness and worst of all, indifference. Lord, we know that you have blessed us and as a result offer ourselves to serve as your earthly hands as we seek to help neighbours who are in trouble or in need. Grant us the patience, wisdom, courage and compassion to act as Jesus would act, but in situations where our best is not enough, we pray that you will reach out to others who can bring about healing and wholeness, for to you all things are possible.

Holy God, we ask you to revive our church and churches throughout the world, particularly as restrictions caused by COVID19 are eased, so that we may a blessing to our communities and to people further afield. Help us set aside our divisions and differences, so we speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him as a united body of believers. Bless and use our love, gifts and graces to share Good News in all we do and say, so our lives reveal the grace of Jesus.

Almighty God, events like the terrible floods in Germany and Belgium and wildfires in the USA and Turkey, with mass destruction and the loss of many lives, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for people affected by the floods and fires and pray for people who are campaigning against pollution and irresponsible use of resources. May everybody come to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world to inherit.

God of shalom, of peace and harmony, we pray for peace across a world defiled with conflicts, persecution, terrorism, prejudice and sectarianism. Hear our prayer for Afghanistan which is under threat as allied troops leave. Lord, guide national leaders to seek justice and mercy in their dealings, so peace may flow like a healing river and we pray heal the divisions we see in our own society. Let your peace begin with us, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world.

Author of wellbeing, we pray for people who are ill including those whose lives are blighted with pain and anxiety when treatment has been held up because of the pandemic. May they receive treatment to restore their health, or at least mitigate the results of neglect and delay. We pray for everybody whose mental and spiritual health has been adversely affected by lockdown restrictions. May they not only seek but receive they support they need.

Remember, too, people who are in any kind of need or trouble; everyone who is living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, in particular, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.

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Lord, help us to offer them both friendship and practical support, but embrace them with your love, so they may be blessed with courage, hope, healing and enduring peace.

Gracious God, we continue to ask your blessing upon everybody who has been working for our wellbeing during this crisis, especially members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers. Dearest Lord, grant them success in their work and keep them safe.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us be beacons of good news, day by day. May we learn to share the living bread you give us in such abundance with our neighbours, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our penultimate hymn was written by Charles Wesley in 1749. It original had sixteen verses and, although shortened in "Singing the Faith", it is published as two hymns, the second being number 528, 'Pray without ceasing, pray'. It was based on a tract by John Wesley: "The Character of a Methodist" (1742) – headed 'The whole armour of God, Ephesians 6'. So....., hymn number 637, 'Soldiers of Christ arise'

**1. Soldiers of Christ, arise,
And put your armour on,
Strong in the strength which God supplies
Through his eternal Son;
Strong in the Lord of hosts,
And in his mighty power,
Who in the strength of Jesus trusts
Is more than conqueror.**

**2. Stand then in his great might,
With all his strength endued;
And take, to arm you for the fight,
The panoply of God;
That, having all things done,
And all your conflicts passed,
You may o'ercome through Christ alone,
And stand complete at last.**

**3. Leave no unguarded place,
No weakness of the soul;
Take every virtue, every grace,
And fortify the whole:
Indissolubly joined,
To battle all proceed;
But arm yourselves with all the mind
That was in Christ, your Head.**

**4. From strength to strength go on,
Wrestle, and fight, and pray,
Tread all the powers of darkness down
And win the well-fought day;
Still let the Spirit cry
In all his soldiers: come!
Till Christ the Lord descend from high
And take the conquerors home.**

© Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

The Epistle is Paul's Letter to the Ephesians chapter 6 verses 10 to 20

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Therefore, put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should. Amen.

Sermon: “Therefore, put on the full armour of God” Ephesians 6:13

Paul invested between two and three years successfully building up the Christian community in Ephesus, but he was frustrated when he was encouraged not to defend himself when silversmiths, led by Demetrius, rioted because they feared his success as an evangelist would harm their trade in shrines of Artemis. He left for Macedonia and on to Greece, encouraging Christian communities as he did so. He had a deep love for the Christians in Ephesus as his final meeting with the elders showed. Although the city part of the Roman Empire which was beginning to persecute Christians and would soon be seen as the epitome of evil by John of Patmos, author of Revelation, this passage from Ephesians reminded the churches that their fight was not against the Roman occupiers, but against the forces of spiritual evil in the world, which was now God's kingdom. Paul used contemporary military equipment as metaphors for both defence against evil and for weapons with which to destroy it.

What then are the spiritual evils in our world? I believe the greatest is indifference – indifference to God, to the difference between good and evil; indifference to the suffering of others, or to the cry of those in need. Next comes aggressive secularism which denies God and attacks anyone who professes any faith. A close third is perversion of truth, where we compromise about right and wrong: for example, whilst it is wrong to rob a bank, it isn't really wrong to pilfer items from work, or for journalists hacking into private voice mails or Emails – to assert, no doubt, **'After all, everyone does it!'** Since the election of President Trump, it has come to the forefront with cries of **'Fake news'** whenever politicians are confronted by unfavourable statements or revelations.

The Millennium G8 pledged to relieve the debt of the world's poorest nations, but it has fallen far short of its targets, so every week more than two hundred thousand children from the Developing World die of starvation, water-borne diseases, or illnesses like measles which are usually easily treated in this country, almost the same number of deaths that occurred in the Indonesian Tsunami on Boxing Day 2004 – yet our Media does not broadcast this obscene toll of poverty. Whenever I look at the parable of Lazarus and Dives, I fear Christ's condemnation of our hemisphere.

Aggressive secularists, who would abolish all religions and who take every opportunity to criticise people of faith, often lay the blame for all wars at the feet of religion, blaming faith groups for all the deaths and suffering in our world. We have to

acknowledge that many wars have been attributed to religious, or denominational disputes, so we need to guard against using our beliefs as a rod to beat others, especially in the light of events in Afghanistan. However, if we consider the greatest killers in the past hundred years, we have **Stalin, Hitler, Mao Tse Tung and Pol Pot – all of whom were atheists.**

As for perversion of truth, consider the influencers and Trolls on Media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. A month ago, Jack Grealish's girlfriend was receiving two hundred obscene and threatening messages per day, some of which were posted by girls of thirteen. She is not alone: think of the hate-mail received by the three England players who missed penalties in the European Cup Final. Even worse are those who have posted blatant falsehoods about the COVIDS29 vaccines, some of which are responsible for otherwise sensible people not being vaccinated. As I write this sermon, there is news of a man in his thirties who believed the falsehoods, but is now in critical care, fighting for his life, filled with regrets about being unvaccinated. I really hope that a way will be found to deal with these purveyors of untruth, for the ethical standards of our civilisation, based on Judaeo-Christian principles, are well-tested and promote a society where individuals are respected and cherished for themselves, where the principle of doing unto others as you would like them to do to you makes sense. If we compromise our moral code, we shall surely spiral into a new Dark Age.

The writer of Ephesians points out what God's armoury offers as our defence against evil: **truth; righteousness – obeying the command to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbour as ourselves; faith in God's redemptive love; the assurance of salvation through Jesus and the Scriptures as our guide.** Above all, we are exhorted to use prayer as a defence, for prayers are never wasted: God listens and answers, even though sometimes his response is not what we expect.

As we emerge from lockdown into a new kind of normality, it will be too easy to fall into the blame culture, rather than looking to the needs, first of one another, so we can recover from the trauma we've all faced and then to the needs of our community. Let us support each other as we renew our fellowship, so we can look outwards at our community and consider what small part we can play in healing some of the hurt wrought by the pandemic. Many people will have been left with depression and anxiety, debt and fears of unemployment as a result of lockdowns, but even more will have a legacy of loneliness caused by the isolation effected by restrictions on mixing. It is an issue I'm addressing at Bridge Court, where, until a month ago, tenants weren't allowed to go into one another's flats, nor to use the communal lounge, to restrict the chance of spreading coronavirus. The policy worked, but at what psychological and spiritual cost? Think of how many people on these estates have been cut off from families and friends for months and who may be too afraid to want to leave their home.

Can we as individuals, or as church, be part of the healing process, either by popping in to see lonely neighbours, or telephoning them, or perhaps seeking to hold tea and chat sessions, so small groups can learn to mix once more? Alternatively, are there other needs that you recognize? Don't forget, we are part of a Circuit, so we can draw on resources and advice. Most importantly, if we work in the power of the Holy Spirit, **she** will help us bring good news at a time when we need it more than ever. Amen. (I am using 'she' because Ruach is Hebrew for the Holy Spirit and it is a feminine noun. I like to be controversial!)

We close our worship with a hymn written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. As is frequently their practise, it is set to a Scots ballad tune, in this case “Kelvingrove”. We shall sing 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.