

A service for 23rd August, 2020 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 138 verses 1 to 3

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. Amen.

We begin our service with a hymn by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a former Methodist Minister whose life almost spanned the entire Twentieth Century and who wrote most of his hymns after he sat down as a minister. 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!**

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Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Creator God, all glory, honour, power and praise are yours, for you are the Living Word who spoke this universe into life, you are the compassionate Wisdom that formed the eco-system that sustains life and you are Grace who favoured us with stewardship over our planet. Your love for us is such that when we had gone astray, you sought to draw us close once more by taking our mortal frame and living amongst us as Christ Jesus.

Jesus not only taught us about your nature and how we ought to live, he became the Perfect Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. His resurrection three days later broke the power of death and he offers us everlasting life through faith in his redemptive love. As we come to worship you, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may give our hearts and minds to you.

We are here to offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; our work and rest; our homes, friends and families; the opportunities and experiences that have fulfilled us, besides challenges that have tested us and shaped our character. Most of all, thank you for loving us even though we often fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. Forgive us for our sins and help us to amend our ways, for Jesus said if we repent in his name, you will pardon us.

Merciful Lord, as you hear and answer our prayers, we believe that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you once again. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, 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.

William Sparrow-Simpson, who wrote the words of our next hymn also wrote the words for John Stainer's "Crucifixion" which was first performed on 24th February, 1887. Indeed, this hymn comes at the end of that august work, but it was not included in a hymnal until 1969. We shall sing hymn number 341, 'All for Jesus – all for Jesus,'

**1. All for Jesus – all for Jesus,
This our song shall ever be:
For we have no hope, nor Saviour,
If we have not hope in thee.**

**2. All for Jesus – thou wilt give us
Strength to serve thee, hour by hour;
None can move us from thy presence,
While we trust thy love and power.**

**3. All for Jesus – thou hast loved us;
All for Jesus – thou hast died;
All for Jesus – thou art with us;
All for Jesus crucified.**

**4. All for Jesus – all for Jesus –
This the church's song must be;
Till, at last, we all are gathered
One in love and one in thee.**

© W.J. Sparrow-Simpson {1859 – 1952}

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns for others to God.

Lord of all, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to help our neighbours, both nearby and far away. Grant us the spiritual gifts we need to answer our call, but, where we find situations that are beyond us, we ask you to motivate and engage other people who possess the power and influence to really make a difference to the world.

God of comfort, hear our heartfelt prayer for the people of Lebanon, following the devastating explosion in Beirut, two weeks ago, that has wrought so much destruction in human and material terms. We know the country is already in financial and political difficulties and the explosion threatens the population with severe food shortages and instability. We pray that the people receive both immediate and long-term aid to help them rebuild their society and to recover from this disaster.

Lord, we pray for peace in those countries where wars are being waged, especially wars that have lasted for years. May your Holy Spirit breathe hope and new life into the dry bones of old conflicts and may your love overcome the hatred inhuman hearts. Bless with success the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism and persecution. Guide the governments of the nations of the world, so they may work for justice and peace, learn to negotiate and resolve disagreements without resorting to violence and oppression. May world leaders strive to end poverty which cripple lives of so many people, here and abroad.

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for victims of COVID 19, both here and abroad. Grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies that will protect the population until this pandemic is brought under control. We pray for medical staff, paramedics, care-workers, scientists and medical researchers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe and crown their endeavours with success, O Lord. Help us to play our own part in defeating COVID19 by patiently observing guidelines laid down by the Government, difficult and confusing though they often are. Most of all, help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can all find comfort in your saving grace.

Lord of wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. May they find healing, renewed strength, comfort and peace, through the professional care and support they receive and also by experiencing your presence in their time of need.

Gracious God, remember people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, as they seek to support them, especially in these turbulent times. Grant them a sense of being loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, remember in your mercy neighbours who are lonely, afraid, broken-hearted, overworked, unemployed, or who face the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for all who are facing a broken relationship, as well as any who mourn the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will know their needs and will reach out to them. Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy and hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, so they may find healing, courage, strength and peace.

Lord, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide: unite us, so everybody may believe that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Help your Church begin to plan for the ending of lockdown, as it faces many serious issues that have arisen during the past six months. Unite us in love and action, so we can find ways of supporting our communities and continue to bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and often hostile world.

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 good lives but to be bold in taking the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

I shall always associate our next hymn with the late Wendy Dudley, a renowned, fearless, local preacher from the old Stourbridge and Brierley Hill Circuit, who used the next hymn just before the offertory at a church whose congregation was somewhat parsimonious. She quoted the lines, “Take my silver and my gold, / Not a mite would I withhold”, then added, “I trust you value Jesus at more than the price of a packet of cigarettes?” It was reported there was a record collection as a result! We shall sing hymn number 566, ‘Take my life, and let it be’.

1. Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.
2. Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for thee.
3. Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from thee.
4. Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as thou shalt choose.
5. Take my will, and make it thine;
It shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart – it is thine own;
It shall be thy royal throne.
6. Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure-store;
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee.

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The first reading is Paul’s Letter to the Romans chapter 12 verses 1 to 8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said,

“Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them,

“But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered,

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Amen.

We shall sing the hymn, ‘The Lord invites us, “Come and see,”’

1. The Lord invites us, ‘Come and see,

Leave all your work and follow me:

Spend time with me and I shall show

The Father’s grace to all below.’

Christ Jesus calls us; let us go

And talk with him, our hearts aglow.

2. The Lord invites us, ‘Eat with me;

The Bread we share will set you free.

I bring good news for one and all

If only they will hear my call.’

Christ Jesus calls us; ‘Let us eat,

And I shall make your faith complete’.

3. The Lord invites us, ‘Share my grief:

Let faith o’ercome your unbelief.

Pray for this world of greed and pain,

And strive to make it whole again.’

Christ Jesus calls us; let us pray

That love and justice win the day.

4. The Lord invites us, ‘Walk with me:

Where’er you serve, there shall I be.

Friends, be my hands, my eyes, my voice

Share all your talents and rejoice.’

Christ Jesus calls us; ‘Follow, friends;

And choose the life that never ends’.

Martin Rider – 1st January, 2017 (to ‘Mozart’ StF 546 or ‘Mount Sion (Pleyel)’ StF661)

Begun during worship at Amblecote Wordsley 01/01/ 2017

Sermon: St. Peter’s Confession of Christ – Matthew 16:13 – 20

I like Simon Peter, but his three years’ discipleship with Jesus was rather like a rollercoaster ride at Alton Towers. Today’s reading probably shows him at his most successful during Jesus’ ministry, because guided by the Holy Spirit he confessed Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed. It was while they were near Caesarea Philippi, that the Lord asked his disciples who the people thought he was. They replied that many thought he was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet. Then Jesus asked them who they thought he was and Peter immediately declared, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

The answer earned Jesus’ praise and he declared the revelation came from God, not from human sources, for it was evident that Peter had not carefully weighed up all the evidence until he was left with the single option that Jesus was God’s anointed.

Peter had based his conclusion purely on faith. Christ added that Peter was to be the Rock on which he'd build his church – and probably made them all laugh, for he was playing on the words Petros, Greek for Peter and Petra, which means a rock. There is irony inasmuch that petros is a stone, or rock that can be detached and moved, whilst petra means a solidly-based mass of rock. The gospels show how Peter was moved by circumstances, emotions and fortune, for within minutes he was in disgrace for arguing against Jesus' announcement of his imminent passion, death and resurrection, none of which fitted Peter's idea of the Messiah. Discipleship wasn't easy for Peter, either!

Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. We know Andrew had been a disciple of John the Baptist, but when John pointed out Jesus as the 'Lamb of God', Andrew not only turned to the Lord, but took Simon along to meet him. Christ instantly recognised his qualities, for he said he'd call him Peter henceforth, punning for the first time that he'd be Rock on which the Church would be established. It is remarkable that anybody would have taken a fisherman from such an obscure, unpromising province, which was regarded contemptuously by the people of Jerusalem, as the first leader of the movement that changed the world and its history, but Jesus did. Perhaps Jesus' decision was based upon Peter's enthusiasm, or insight, or his willingness to go where angels feared to tread, or to speak when silence would be safer; or perhaps it was Peter's sincerity that moved Christ.

From the start Peter was in Jesus' inner circle, with James & John. It was Peter's mother-in-law who Jesus healed in an early miracle. Peter witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter and it was he who asked Christ to explain the meanings of several parables and questioned Jesus' teaching about forgiveness – not because he was awkward, but because he wanted to understand the Lord fully. When the inner circle was with Jesus at the transfiguration, it was Peter who broke the awed silence to ask if they should build shelters for Christ, Moses and Elijah. It was Peter alone who had sufficient faith and enthusiasm to ask Jesus if he could walk on the water like him, even though he lost his nerve and had to be rescued by our Lord. Remember, at least he tried: the others merely cowered in the boat!

Even Peter's greatest failure after Jesus' betrayal and arrest isn't wholly discreditable. The disciples' tiredness was evident from their inability to stay awake to keep watch in the Garden of Gethsemane, so Peter's attempts to defend Jesus with a sword shows commendable steadfastness, though Jesus rebuked him for resisting with violence. When the other followers fled, only Peter was brave enough to follow the mob into the courtyard of Caiaphas' palace, for he wanted to see what happened to his Master and friend. What followed is a warning to all who boast, for shortly before Christ's arrest, for Peter had declared that, even if the others deserted him, he wouldn't. Jesus replied that, in the event, Peter would deny knowing him three times before the cock crowed twice and that's precisely what happened. How bitterly must Peter have regretted his failure of nerve, not only for denying his friend, but because he thought it certain he'd forfeited right to be the Church's Rock.

He returned, broken, to that locked room in Jerusalem, remaining there while Jesus was crucified. He was still hiding inside when Mary Magdalene beat frantically on the door, two days later, crying that the Lord's body had been taken away. At once, both Peter and John left the house, disregarding all danger, and raced to the tomb. Although John hesitated at the entrance, Peter impulsively rushed inside and saw the neatly-folded burial clothes which pointed to resurrection, not the theft of a body. Peter was the first male follower to whom the risen Christ appeared, but he still doubted that

he'd be allowed to lead the Church until the incident in John's gospel, when Jesus breakfasted with his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee and asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" Each time Peter affirmed his love, he had to face his failures, so he learned that, to become a true disciple, he needed to trust in Christ, not in own strength. At that point Jesus commissioned him to tend his sheep, to become the Church's Pastor.

Remember how, at Pentecost, Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, preached his first sermon, resulting in more than three thousand people being baptised in Jesus' name. I confess feeling a little jealous, for all my first sermon achieved was several burnt dinners in Brierley Hill! Working in the power of the Holy Spirit with Paul and the apostles, Peter helped to found the movement that's changed world history and at the end, Peter's nerve held when Nero's persecution of Christians led to his crucifixion. According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down, because he said he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Master.

Why do I like Peter? In many ways he was just as fallible as we are: he made mistakes, said the wrong things – got into trouble, but he always got back up and tried again; sometimes he was slow to pick up ideas, but he kept on trying to learn; he was known to speak rashly and acted before considering the consequences, but only through his enthusiasm. Above all else, although he was accepted as leader of the Church, Peter was humble enough to allow stories to be written about himself that weren't creditable, so that in him we may see the Church's human face, not an alabaster image created by spin-doctors! **Let's be enthusiastic in our discipleship, not worn down by routine and traditions. Let us pick ourselves up when things go wrong. Let us keep on travelling with Christ, even when the path is uncertain, or rough. Above all else, let us accept ourselves for who we are, faults and all, confident that Jesus loves us fully, just as we are. Amen.**

We close our service as we sing number 415, 'The Church of Christ, in every age'.

1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.
2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.
3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.
4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.
5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.

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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.