

A service for 23rd October, 2022 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 51 verses 10 to 13

Create a pure heart in me, O God, and put a new and loyal spirit in me. Do not banish me from your presence; do not take your holy spirit away from me. Give me again the joy that comes from your salvation, and make me willing to obey you. Then I will teach sinners your commands, and they will turn back to you. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and, like many of their hymns, is set to a Gaelic melody, in this case from the Isle of Lewis, 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)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, you are the Word of life who brought our universe into being and sustain it with your love. We see your glory revealed both in the vastness of space with its myriad suns, planets and moons, as well as the beauty and complexity of life on this planet. We rejoice in the colours and fruitfulness of autumn which highlight the work of your hands. In the light of your wisdom, might and holiness, we are amazed that you care for flawed, sinful human beings so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, who revealed your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Amazing God, take away all anxieties and distractions so we may pray to you in faith, sing our hymns of praise joyfully and both understand and respond to your holy word. All honour

and glory, power and praise be yours now and forevermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond, 'Forgive and restore us'. Let us pray.

Lord, our Good Shepherd, you bless us day by day with good things to enjoy, with opportunities and experiences that help us prosper. You bring us safely through life's trials and temptations and you guide and protect us. You are truly amazing and we rejoice to be part of your flock.

However, like sheep we confess that we have strayed from the path you want us to follow: we still ignore your calls and go our own way. Too often we are selfish and self-centred, ignoring the needs of our neighbours; we give way to anger and prejudice, saying things that hurt and offend other people and grieve you.

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Like sheep, we find ourselves in barren places because of our pride and greed. There are times we take more than we need and will not share what we don't want. We are frequently loveless and unlovable, lost and ashamed.

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Loving, faithful God, you hear and answer our prayers. You seek us out and joyfully carry us home to the path of righteousness, so we can journey with you once more. Help us to keep our Saviour Jesus Christ at the heart of all we do and say, so we lead lives of loving service in his precious name. Amen.

We shall say the Lord's Prayer

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 second hymn was written by Martin Lekebusch an I.T. specialist, who was born into a Methodist family in 1962. He is distinctly ecumenical and has been a member of Methodist, Anglican, Pentecostal congregations and is an elder at a Baptist church in Gloucester. The hymn was written when Martin was attending a Methodist church in inner-city Birmingham. He describes the congregation at that time as "a very mixed bag with a strongly evangelical character to it, with a charismatic aspect – but also an aspect of social engagement." Within this context, a series of lunchtime services was planned, in which Bob Dunnnett of the Birmingham Bible Institute spoke about problems in society, drawing on passages from the prophet Isaiah. With just a week's notice, Martin was asked to write a hymn that reflected this theme. Hymn number 703, 'In an age of twisted values,'

**1. In an age of twisted values
we have lost the truth we need;
in sophisticated language
we have justified our greed;
by our struggle for possessions
we have robbed the poor and weak –**

hear our cry and heal our nation:
your forgiveness, Lord, we seek.

**2. We have built discrimination
on our prejudice and fear;
hatred swiftly turns to cruelty
if we hold resentments dear.
For communities divided
by the walls of class and race
hear our cry and heal our nation:
show us, Lord, your love and grace.**

**3. When our families are broken;
when our homes are full of strife;
when our children are bewildered,
when they lose their way in life;
when we fail to give the aged
all the care we know we should –
hear our cry and heal our nations
with your tender fatherhood.**

**4. We who hear your word so often
choose so rarely to obey;
turn us from our wilful blindness,
give us truth to light our way.
In the power of your Spirit
come to cleanse us, make us new:
hear our cry and heal our nations
till our nations honours you.**

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We shall now bring our concerns for the world to our Lord.

Lord, you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, but our hearts sink when we see so much suffering around us, much of which is the result of human greed, pride, foolishness and indifference. Where we are able to serve you, use us as your earthly hands. Grant us the compassion, courage, wisdom and steadfastness to be effective, but where we can't bring about the changes the world requires, we ask you to prompt and warm the hearts of people who have the power, skill and influence to intervene, for all things are possible to you.

Gracious God, news reports of conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem, civil strife in Iran and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia with threats of escalation into nuclear exchanges make us all anxious for the future of mankind. As Prince of peace, hear our prayer for an end to wars and strife which mar so many countries around the world, bringing destruction, death, injury and displacement. Warm and mould the hearts of the leaders of all nations and guide them in the ways of justice and mercy through which lasting peace can be achieved.

Generous God, we pray for the victims of floods in Pakistan and of recent hurricanes in Haiti, Cuba and Florida, that they may receive speedy help. We remember, too, our neighbours in countries facing severe famines like Afghanistan and those in the horn of Africa, where droughts and conflict have exacerbated the situation. We ask a blessing on

organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid. May they succeed in bringing relief to those needy lands.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy and rise in inflation increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which are helping the poor. Despite the dire economic situation, may the Government and other agencies, including the Church find ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we offer our prayer for neighbours who are ill, or in any kind of need or trouble, for people who are living with anxiety or depression, or those whose relationships have broken down but, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear and find it difficult to come to terms with their grief. In a time of quiet reflection, we offer names of those for whom we are particularly concerned – confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know and meet their needs. Heavenly Father, help us to support them in whatever way we can, but embrace them all with your love, so they may be healed, comforted, given hope, encouraged and blessed with enduring peace.

Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. As we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus into a financial crisis, help us to renew and alter our ministries to our communities, so we can meet our neighbours' needs and offer not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. May we have faith to bear the gospel light of hope and joy to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, Bless us, our families and friends. Inspire us to keep Christ at the centre of our lives, so we share the abundance of your love in all we do and say, in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 18 verses 9 to 14

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Amen.

Thomas Colvin was ordained as a Church of Scotland minister and became a missionary who served in Malawi and Ghana until 1976. He wrote our next hymn during a day training course for evangelists at Chereponi, Ghana in the mid-1960s. I wonder if he was bored by the course, or inspired by it. He set his words to a Ghanaian love song. Hymn number 249, ‘Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,’ Jesu, Jesu

Fill us with your love,

Show us how to serve

The neighbours we have from you.

**1. Kneels at the feet of his friends,
Silently washes their feet,
Master who acts as a slave to them: *Chorus***

**2. Neighbours are rich folk and poor,
Neighbours are black folk and white,
Neighbours are nearby and far away: *Chorus***

**3. These are the ones we should serve,
These are the ones we should love.
All these are neighbours to us and you: *Chorus***

**4. Kneel at the feet of our friends,
Silently washing their feet,
This is the way we should live with you: *Chorus***

© T.S. Colvin {born 1925}

Sermon: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:14
Revd. Devadas Matcha who served as a minister in our Circuit was from a North Indian family of Dalits, the lowest caste in Hindu society – often referred to as ‘Untouchables’. They were despised by members of other castes, were denied higher education and usually could only find menial, or labouring work. That was bad enough, you may think, but when Devadas’ family became Christians when he was a child, his father was severely beaten and the whole family ostracised by the villagers. Devadas told me how lonely his childhood was, for no other children would play with him because he was both Christian and a Dalit. The caste system still operates in India, even amongst some Sikhs, despite its prohibition in the Holy Book, “Guru Granth Sahib Ji”, where the Gurus taught that we should not look down on others.

Luke’s passage showed that the same malaise existed in Jesus ministry, for it began, ‘**To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:**’ His words were directed primarily at the Pharisees and Scribes, for although both groups tried their best to obey every one of the **613 rules connected to Torah** and therefore strove their uttermost to be holy, they looked down on other people as inferiors, unworthy and probably condemned by the Lord. Pharisees and Scribes believed that they would be saved by their works, that they could earn God’s favour by following every detail of Torah, but Jesus teaches us that all their efforts are in vain, for we are saved by God’s grace alone. **In simple terms, grace is the unmerited, unconditional love of God, for he loves us completely – as we are.** Nothing we can do will make him love us more or less than he already does, so we are free to serve him as a response to his loving-kindness, rather than having to do the equivalent of community service like a modern minor criminal. However, with this freedom comes responsibility: we need to acknowledge our sinfulness and to turn away from wrongdoing, back towards God’s path. After all, we cannot expect God’s forgiveness if we simply say ‘**Sorry**’, but continue doing wrong.

In his parable, Jesus showed the smug Pharisee, convinced of his righteousness, thanking God that he was better than other people, for not only had he faithfully observed

the Laws of Moses, he exceeded the requirements for fasting and tithing. The Torah requires only **one fast – on the Day of Atonement** – but this Pharisee fasted every **Monday and Thursday**, a practice of only the strictest Jews and he **tithed everything, including goods he had bought**, in case the vendors had not tithed. As a result, he approached God expecting congratulations, rather than acknowledging that, despite his outward appearances, he was a sinner in need of both forgiveness and spiritual refreshment. His pride took him away from God, for he looked down on people who were not as strict in their observance as he.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was painfully aware of his sinfulness and of the way in which fellow Jews reviled his kind as collaborators with the Roman State that occupied their land: worse still, they were hated as cheats, collecting in more revenue than Rome demanded and pocketing the difference. This man could not even look upwards when he addressed the Lord. Instead he beat his breast as a public sign of grief and said, **‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner’**. Here was a man who knew that he needed to change his ways and asked God to help him do so. For that reason, Jesus declared that it was the tax collector who was made right with God, not the Pharisee – probably outraging the **‘respectable’** Jews who heard the parable.

Jesus gave us the model for prayer: we honour God; we seek to do his will; we ask for our daily needs, spiritual as well as material; we ask his forgiveness as we acknowledge that we must forgive others in return and we ask for the strength to resist temptation to sin. Unlike the Pharisee, Jesus never praised himself, though of all people he had every justification to have done so.

Were I to be given £1 for every occasion that people have told me, **“I’m not good enough to go to church”**, I’d be a wealthy man. It may be amusing in one way that anybody should feel unworthy to come into church, but I have a nagging fear that we Christians sometimes project the same kind of prickly rectitude as that Pharisee. In his address at a Charles Wesley Celebration at Darlington Street, Dr. Leslie Griffiths described the chapel-goers in the village where he lived as a boy as **‘vinegar-faced’**. If people consider us so inflexible and unapproachably correct that they feel unwelcome in church what a disservice we do to Christ, for he mixed with the unclean, the sinful, despised outsiders of society. He ate with them, talked with them and offered them healing and hope. Jesus is the most inclusive person to have walked the earth, yet 2000 years later our society needs laws to stop us excluding others because of their gender, race, colour, creed, age and social status. Perhaps every church should have a notice by the entrance: **ONLY SINNERS ARE WELCOME HERE!**

When people ask me how I deal with tenants at Bridge Court who are living with a dementia, I tell them that I try to put myself in their shoes and then feel humbled by the way in which even the most severely challenged manage their changed reality and massive loss that accompanies dementias. At that point, I invariably need to pray for guidance, rather than thinking I am clever enough to have all the answers – and, you know, the Lord has never let me down yet. **Christ Jesus challenges us to be humble, to acknowledge our need for God’s grace, to seek spiritual food through prayer and to look at our neighbours as he views them: individuals made in the Father’s image, each precious enough not only to love with a passion, but to die for, as he did at Calvary. May we meet that challenge as individuals and as the Church. Amen.**

Our closing hymn is believed by some commentators to have been the Wesleys' Conversion hymn, rather than 'Where shall my wondering soul begin' and it was certainly a favourite of John Wesley. It is often referred to as 'The Methodist Anthem', but it has a less reverent nickname in Tipton, where it is referred to as "The Bicycle Hymn", because 'My chains fell off'! I love the Tiptonian sense of humour: I not only taught there for thirty-five years but married one! We shall sing hymn number 345, 'And can it be'

**1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

**2. 'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds enquire no more.**

**3. He left his Father's throne above –
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me!**

**4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.**

**5. No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!**

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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.