

A service for 25th October, 2020 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3

Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God. Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD, and they study it day and night. They are like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time, and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do. Amen.

We shall sing a paraphrase of the Hundred and third Psalm, written by Revd. Henry Francis Lyte, Rector of Lower Brixham in the early Nineteenth Century and author of "Abide with me". Hymn number 83, 'Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,'

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**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 pray.

Heavenly Father, we do indeed come to praise and worship you, for you are the King of heaven, Creator and Sustainer of all life throughout the universe, the one true God whose power and wisdom are far beyond our understanding. You are not only holy, but faithful, compassionate, just, merciful, glorious, lovely and truly worthy of our adoration. Hear and accept our heartfelt worship.

Thank you, Lord, for all that you give us and do for us, for we know how you have blessed us from our earliest days. Thank you, too, for your amazing grace that sent your Son, Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, guide and friend. He came to live among us, so we might know your holy will and purpose: he died for the sins of the whole world and was raised to grant us everlasting life through faith in him.

However, when we consider ourselves, we see how short we fall of what you would have us be, for our lives are marred by things that we have said and done which have hurt or upset others and angered you. We recall, too, times when we have failed to help people who were in distress, trouble, or need and, even though we seek to justify doing nothing, we know how hard-hearted we were. Merciful God, help us change our ways and forgive us in the beautiful name of Jesus, for we want to follow him more truly.

Loving God, you proclaim that our sins are forgiven and you call us to follow you, once more, free from the burden of our guilt. May our response to your grace be to serve our neighbours with warm, caring hearts, so that our lives bring honour to your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As our Saviour taught his disciples, we sing:

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 our worship as we sing a hymn by Timothy Rees, who served as a chaplain in the Great War and was Bishop of Llandaff between 1931 and 1938. Hymn number 103, 'God is love: let heaven adore him;'

1. God is love: let heaven adore him;

God is love: let earth rejoice;

Let creation sing before him,

And exalt him with one voice.

He who laid the earth's foundation,

He who spread the heavens above,

He who breathes through all creation,

He is Love, eternal Love.

2. God is love and he enfoldeth

All the world in one embrace;

With unfailing grasp he holdeth

Every child of every race.

And when human hearts are breaking

Under sorrow's iron rod,

Then they find that selfsame aching

Deep within the heart of God.

3. God is love: and though with blindness

Sin afflicts the souls of men,

God's eternal loving-kindness

Holds and guides them even then.

Sin and death and hell shall never

O'er us final triumph gain;

God is love, so love for ever

O'er the universe must reign.

© Timothy Rees (1874 – 1939)

We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

God most gracious and holy, thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout our lives and which we are confident will bring us through this

time of trial. Help us to reveal the light of your love in our daily lives, so we can lighten some of the darkness that has enveloped the world for the last eight months by caring for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us all we need to answer your call, but in circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for an end to conflicts, terrorism and persecution around the world. Remember those in countries where conflicts are raging and inspire their leaders to negotiate agreements that helps people to co-exist in harmony. Guide us all in the way of peace, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world, for peace starts with us.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, the churches in our Circuit and our neighbours, and indeed remember the World Church. Help us as we begin to open our buildings and plan for the ending of lockdown, for many churches are facing significant issues that have arisen during the past half year. Nevertheless, help us all to share the Good News, united in words and deeds, so we reveal Christ as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

Lord of shalom, or wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Let them feel your presence in their time of need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout their treatment. We pray for people living with a dementia, their families and carers for whom the current pandemic has added greatly to the problems they face. Bring them comfort, reassurance and help.

We remember, too, neighbours both in care homes and the community who are lonely, or troubled by depression and anxiety, for people who are in debt, or who face the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody whose relationships have broken down and others 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 reach out to them. Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship, although that is difficult at a time of social distancing, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love and comfort.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. May the population follow the guidance we receive, even though it may not suit our inclinations, so we play our part in ending the spread of this virus.

We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe in their duties and help them to successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccines that work. Help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

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 Christ-centred lives but to share the abundance of your love with a broken world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Thomas Colvin wrote our next hymn during a day training course for evangelists at Chereponi, Ghana in the mid-1960s. I wonder whether he was inspired by the course to pen these words, or wrote them because he was bored? Whatever the reason, 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} – based on a song from northern Ghana

The Old Testament reading is Leviticus chapter 19 verses 1 & 2 and 15 to 18

The LORD told Moses to say to the community of Israel,

“Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy. Be honest and just when you make decisions in legal cases; do not show favouritism to the poor or fear the rich. Do not spread lies about anyone, and when someone is on trial for his life, speak out if your testimony can help him. I am the LORD.

Do not bear a grudge against anyone, but settle your differences with him, so that you will not commit a sin because of him. Do not take revenge on anyone or continue to hate him, but love your neighbour as you love yourself. I am the LORD.” Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 22 verses 34 to 46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they came together, and one of them, a teacher of the Law, tried to trap him with a question.

“Teacher,” he asked, “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

Jesus answered,

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and the most important commandment. The second most important commandment is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ The whole Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets depend on these two commandments.”

When some Pharisees gathered together, Jesus asked them, “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose descendant is he?”

“He is David’s descendant,” they answered.

“Why, then,” Jesus asked, “did the Spirit inspire David to call him ‘Lord’? David said, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: Sit here on my right until I put your

enemies under your feet.’ If, then, David called him ‘Lord’, how can the Messiah be David’s descendant?”

No one was able to give Jesus any answer, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn by an unknown author. Let us sing it through twice. Hymn number 242, ‘A new commandment I give unto you:’

A new commandment

I give unto you:

That you love one another

As I have loved you,

That you love one another

As I have loved you.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

By this shall all know

That you are my disciples

If you have love one for another.

Anonymous

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? Before I became the Chaplain at Wednesfield MHA, I was a part-time lay-worker for Amblecote Methodist Church. As a result, I visited a number of dementia care and nursing homes, too many of which fitted the stereotypical ‘Old Folks’ Home’, with residents sitting in a large plain lounge, at one end of which would be a large television that showed a totally inappropriate programme – **Jeremy Kyle or CBeebies** – invariably with volume set at maximum, making conversation almost impossible. The residents would either sit slumped forwards in their chairs, many sleeping, others simply inert, while still others would be arguing with their neighbours, ignored by the carer, or carers on duty. Whilst these homes fulfilled the minimum standards of care, they lacked any kind of love – and over the last few years we have heard reports about some of our care homes and hospitals where elderly patients have received treatment that would be unacceptable even in Third World countries!

At present, with lockdown, our carers are committed to reassuring, calming, engaging with, listening to and supporting our tenants, and our Activities Co-ordinator is trying to involve them in activities to keep them as positive as possible. A few years ago, the newly-bereaved husband of one of our Waterside House residents commented to me, **‘I didn’t know angels smoked!’** – a tribute to the loving-kindness he and his wife had received from the time she became a resident until long after her funeral. Yet all of these ‘angels’ are ordinary people doing extraordinary things, not only because they are well-trained, but because they are committed to love the people for whom they care, largely through the ethos of MHA from the top down. Whilst few

are Methodists; indeed, some are Sikhs and others profess no faith; they cling to the Wesleyan principle that everybody is precious in God's eyes.

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. Look around and we can see many people are in need and support at present: neighbours who are lonely, afraid, suffering from long-COVID, people with job and financial worries, 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 socially-distanced seats in our churches. That may come, God-willing, but our support for them 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 1969 by Revd. Fred Pratt Green and titled, 'The Caring Church'. Hymn 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.