

A service for 26th November, 2023 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. 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 pray.

King of creation and Lord of all, we are here to offer our worship and adoration, for you formed heaven and earth and made every living thing. You have blessed us from our earliest days, giving us the wisdom to use the earth's resources and the awareness of what is good and bad, so we may fulfil our responsibility to act as stewards of this planet.

However, your love for us is so great that, even when we failed to honour our duties to you and our stewardship of the earth, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you took our mortal form and lived among us as Jesus Christ. His life, death and resurrection have not only showed us in words and deeds how we should live, but

redeemed us from enslavement to sin and offered us everlasting life through faith in him. Hear us, O Lord, as we sing your praises joyfully, pray to you in faith and receive your holy word.

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 the good things we enjoy, for experiences and opportunities that have fulfilled and enriched us and for people who have brought us guidance, light, love and joy into our lives, but most of all thank you for your amazing grace that sent your Son, Jesus Christ, as our Saviour, guide and friend.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you and our neighbours in thought and word and deed, that our lives are marred by things that we have said and done which have hurt 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 have been. Merciful God, help us change our ways and forgive us in the beautiful name of Jesus.

Loving God, we believe that through your grace our sins have been forgiven and we may follow you, freed from the burden of our guilt. May we serve our neighbours with faithful and 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 say:

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 next hymn was written by a suffragan Bishop of Thetford and a very gifted hymn-writer, Timothy Dudley-Smith. It considers God in the past present and future, holy, unchangeable and faithful. We sing hymn number 470, 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided'.

**1. Lord, for the Years, your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.**

**2. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.**

**3. Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.**

**4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt you,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.**

**5. Lord for ourselves; in living pow'r remake us –
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:**

Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

© Timothy Dudley-Smith {1926 -}

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

God of all nations, you sent Jesus as the Servant King, to address the world's brokenness and so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to help us to seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours and to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out and offering practical support to neighbours who are in need or trouble. May we be given the steadfast faith and compassion we need to serve you well. Lord, there are so many situations which are beyond our power, but which are possible to you, so we ask you to bring healing and wholeness to our suffering world.

Heavenly King, lead and inspire leaders of the nations of the world so they lead their people with mercy and justice and do not resort to violence in order to have their own way. May they learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so their words offer grace and reconciliation rather than contempt, or threats.

We pray for peace as we grieve over the war in Ukraine and the bitter conflict between Hamas and the Israeli Defence Force in Gaza. Heavenly Father, hear our cry of grief for the many lives lost as a result of the attack by Hamas on 7th October in southern Israel and in subsequent fighting in Gaza, most of whose population are non-combatants, the elderly, women and children with nowhere to flee, caught between the warring sides, deprived of food, water, fuel and medicines and facing constant danger. We remember, too, the hostages taken by Hamas and their families and, whilst we appreciate its fury, we ask that the Knesset will not allow its desire for revenge to overcome its observance of international law.

King of all, we pray for people killed in wars; those whose bodies, minds and spirits have been crippled by war, persecution, or terrorism and for the huge numbers of people displaced because of conflicts. May they be given the support they need to rebuild their lives in peace and security, buoyed up by our compassion.

King 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. Merciful God, we pray for victims of disasters and famines. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee. Grant them the resources they need for their work.

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

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

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.

We continue with a hymn penned by Charles Wesley in 1762, based upon Exodus chapter 13 verse 21. It was slightly modified by John Wesley in 1780. Hymn number 459, 'Captain of Israel's host, and Guide'

Captain of Israel's host, and Guide
of all who seek the land above,
beneath your shadow we abide,
the cloud of your protecting love;
our strength, your grace; our rule, your word;
our end, the glory of the Lord.

By your unerring Spirit led,
we shall not in the desert stray;
we shall not full direction need,
nor miss our providential way;
as far from danger as from fear,
while love, almighty love, is near.

© C. Wesley {1707 – 1788}

The Old Testament reading is Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 to 16 and 20 to 24 For this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

'I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.'

Therefore, this is what the Sovereign LORD says to them:

'See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be plundered. I will judge between one sheep and another. I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the LORD have spoken.' Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right,

'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

Then the righteous will answer him,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply,
'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

Then he will say to those on his left,
'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

They also will answer,
'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?'

He will reply,
'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing a version of the Twenty-third Psalm by Revd. Sir Henry Williams Baker, vicar of Monkland in Herefordshire. 'The King of love' first appeared in the appendix of 'Hymns Ancient & Modern' in 1868, but although Revd. Baker was the chairman of the hymnal's compilers, the hymn appeared by merit alone. Hymn number 479, 'The King of Love my Shepherd is'.

1. The King of love my shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever.
2. Where streams of living water flow,
My ransomed soul he leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow
With food celestial feedeth.
3. Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.
4. In death's dark vale I fear no ill
With thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me.
5. Thou spread'st a table in my sight;
Thy unction grace bestoweth;
And O what transport of delight
From thy pure chalice floweth!
6. And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never:

**Good Shepherd, may I sing thy praise
Within thy house for ever.**

© Henry Williams Baker {1821 – 1877}

Sermon: *'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'* Matt 25:40

From ancient times, rulers in the Near East often styled themselves as shepherds of their people, for in agricultural societies, the image of a shepherd tending his sheep was a powerful one, emphasising the strength, courage and wisdom of the king against the relative helplessness of his people. Unfortunately for the Jews of both the Northern and the Southern Kingdom, their kings were a very mixed bunch, with pitifully few following God's ways and caring for ordinary people. This explains why Ezekiel wrote critically of the weak rule of the kings of Judah and their disastrous effects on his fellow-citizens. Six hundred years later, Jesus used the same imagery in John chapter 10, because of the rule of corrupt Herodians and religious establishment, the Sanhedrin.

The prophet **Ezekiel was born during the reign of King Josiah**, after whose rule the land went into decline as neighbouring powers threatened. ***The Assyrian Empire collapsed, but was replaced by the mighty Babylonian Empire that threatened Judah and conquered much of it before Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed in 597 B.C..*** Ezekiel was a contemporary of **Jeremiah** and also preached of the need for Judeans to turn once more to God, or face the consequences. ***He was deported to Babylon with King Jehoiachin and the last group of Jews from the Holy City.*** However, Ezekiel did not just predict the destruction of a faithless people, he also preached that God would restore the remnant himself and would establish a just society under a new David. The fat sheep would no longer dominate the thin sheep in the new order, for God's Chosen One would tend them and be their shepherd.

In our Gospel reading, Jesus tells us how he will separate the good from the bad when he comes in glory, as a shepherd distinguishes between sheep and goats – it was not such an easy thing to do in the Near East at the time of Jesus, for the native sheep of Judah bore a striking resemblance to goats, unlike the fluffy ones we see in this country. The criterion on which judgement will be made has nothing to do with status, or scholarship, or being religious, or self-righteousness: people will be judged by the way they honour the second part of the Greatest Commandment: **'to love your neighbour as you love yourself'**. It is clear that the truly righteous may not even know that they have served Jesus by helping those in need, but that is precisely what Jesus is asking his followers to do.

When Jesus as Shepherd said, **'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me'**, they asked when they had done anything to him. His reply is illuminating: **"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did for me.'"** In effect, we are called to continue what Jesus had declared he had come to fulfil: **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."** Fine words are not enough; we are Christ's earthly hands and, just as he brought practical love, so we are called to do the same.

The wonderful thing is that we are free to choose to serve as Jesus did, for we enjoy God's favour through grace. Be assured, God loves us to the uttermost, despite our failings and sinfulness. We do not have to try to win God's love, but instead can respond to the knowledge that God loves us enough to have sacrificed his Only Son, whom he loved, to restore us to him. When we experience such love, how can we not love in return? It was practical love that inspired early Methodists, sending them among the 'rude masses' in the shambling squalid towns of the early Industrial Revolution, with a gospel of hope that the Church of England at the time was unwilling to take to the slums and smoke of towns in the Black Country and beyond.

Notice how the Shepherd image does not only involve caring for the helpless, hurt, stray and weak, but shows strong leadership. The Church is called, therefore, not only to look to the needs of the vulnerable and marginalized of this country and further afield, but to be a voice to the world. We are challenged to stand up for a world where justice and mercy are extended to all, which means courting unpopularity at times. Jesus willingly did so, because he cared for all-comers, particularly the poor, foreigners, social rejects and downtrodden. Sometimes, it is tempting to remain silent, to do nothing, just so we may have a quiet life, but that's not Christ's way. Only by standing up for our beliefs can we make a change. Here is how one man did just that.

John Pounds was born in Portsmouth in 1766. His father worked in the Royal Dockyards, so it was natural that John should have been apprenticed to a shipwright on his twelfth birthday. A promising career ended three years later when John fell from high on a ship in dry dock and broke nearly every bone in his body. He was taken home in a wheelbarrow, because the family could not afford medical fees. The boy took three years to recover, though he was bent almost double from his injuries. During those years he read avidly so, although he was no longer able to work at the dockyard, he learned to make shoes. In 1803, he bought a shop with a living room above the workshop and made a good living, even though the shop measured five by two and a half metres. When John's brother, a sailor, was unable to look after his crippled son, John took him in. He made special boots for the boy that – in time – cured his crippled feet. However, that wasn't enough for John, who taught him the trade and made him a partner.

This experience led John to consider the plight of the urchins who begged and stole in Portsmouth's streets. He decided that they needed more than the basics of life, so he enticed them into his workshop with the promise of a baked apple or a baked potato, so that he could teach them. Despite the size of his shop, John taught up to forty of these rough children at a time, without recourse to corporal punishment and no child was said to have left unable to read, write, or do simple sums. In addition, he taught them nature study, history and the Scriptures. He nursed them when they were ill, begged respectable clothes, so that some could accompany him to church, put a sign above the shop door, 'Little vagabonds preferred' and accepted only children whose parents could not afford to pay for their education.

Others heard of his 'Ragged School' and the idea spread. By the mid-1800s there were more than six hundred Ragged Schools in England and Wales and the President of the Ragged School Union was no less than Lord Shaftesbury, through whom universal education became law in 1871. He must have seen value in the Ragged School Movement, for he remained President for thirty-nine years. By the time John Pounds died, on 31st December, 1839, he must have rejoiced that from such a small beginning a mighty movement had grown. **In the name of the Servant King, let us also seek to find ways to help the vulnerable and lonely. Amen.**

Our final hymn was written by Graham Kendrick for 'Spring Harvest' in 1984 and reminds us that Jesus came to serve and love us, not to Lord it over us. We shall sing hymn number 272, 'The Servant King'

**1. From heaven You came,
Helpless babe, entered our world,
Your glory veiled; not to be served
But to serve and give Your life
That we might live. *Chorus:***

*This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.*

**2. There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load he chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not My will but Yours,' He said. *Chorus:***

**3. Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered. *Chorus:***

**4. So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him;
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving. *Chorus:***

© Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

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.