

A service for 26th July, 2020 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verse 10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. Amen.

I wrote our opening hymn following a visit to the late Revd. Peter Knight shortly before his death, when he worried that some services barely brought us into the presence of Jesus. Let us sing, 'Christ is here, within this place!'

1. Christ is here, within this place!

Bringing his redemptive grace.

Stop: be still and hear his voice,

Bid him welcome and rejoice. *Chorus:*

Light of the world, Redeemer King,

We our heartfelt praises sing.

2. Christ is here to tend each soul,

Seek the lost and make us whole.

Christ came here to set us free

On a cross at Calvary. *Chorus:*

3. Christ is here! He lives again,

Shares our joys, our woes, our pain.

Christ is here, his word receive;

Fear no more, trust and believe. *Chorus:*

4. Christ is here and he must reign

In our hearts, or all is vain.

Christ is here! Come one, come all,

Worship him and heed his call. *Chorus:*

M. Rider 5th Oct. 2018 (To 'Lucerna Laudoniae' StF 102i)

Let us pray.

Creator God, you spoke life into the universe, creating myriad galaxies of stars, planets and moons on a scale we cannot gauge. You set us on this living planet with its remarkably diverse species of plants and animals and, in your love for humankind, you gave us the intelligence to appreciate and make use of our world's resources, making us stewards here on earth. We have come to worship you today, freely acknowledging your holiness and sovereignty and rejoicing that from the earliest times, you have revealed yourself to human beings so we might know, love and serve you.

Even when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you showed your boundless grace by living among us as Jesus Christ, bringing Good News in words and deeds and then becoming the One perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. When he was raised on the third day, Jesus opened the gates of heaven, so we have the free gift of eternal life through faith in him.

Amazing God, take away from us all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit, love and truth.

We come to thank you, O Lord, for all the good things with which you have blessed us: for the beauty of the earth; for our homes and food; for people who have brought light, joy and love into our lives and experiences that have brought us happiness and fulfilment. Above all these blessings, thank you for loving us even when we are loveless and faithless.

Merciful Lord, we confess that our lives often fall short of what they ought to be. We know that all too often our words, and deeds hurt and upset other people and fill you with grief. We don't always serve you wholeheartedly and we certainly don't always care for other people as we would like them to care for us. Help us to change our ways, to become what you want us to be and, in Jesus' lovely name, pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed to do.

Merciful heavenly Father, we are confident that you have heard our prayer and have forgiven us. Help us to show our love for you by the way we care for our neighbours, in Jesus' lovely 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.

The words of our second hymn were penned by Revd. Thomas Caryl Micklem, a URC minister and religious broadcaster in 1975. This is one of his best-known hymns, yet I have rarely used it in worship. Shame on me! We shall sing hymn number 520, 'Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart'

**1. Give to me, Lord, a thankful heart
And a discerning mind;
Give, as I play the Christian's part,
The strength to finish what I start
And act on what I find.**

**2. When, in the rush of days, my will
Is habit-bound and slow,
Help me to keep in vision still
What love and power and peace can fill
A life that trusts in you.**

**3. By your divine and urgent claim,
And by your human face,
Kindle our sinking hearts to flame,
And as you teach the world your name
Let it become your place.**

**4. Jesus, with all your Church I long
To see your kingdom come:
Show me your way of righting wrong
And turning sorrow into song
Until you bring me home.**

© *Thomas Caryl Micklem (1925 – 2003)*

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.

God of all grace, grant us the power of your Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but for circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible and you can warm the hearts of people with gifts, graces and power to bring about much needed changes.

Gracious God, inspire and lead those who wield authority and power in the nations of the world: guide them and all people in the way of justice and peace, so that they learn to negotiate, compromise and resolve disagreements without resorting to violence. We pray for the victims of war, terrorism and persecution: people who have been killed and their families and friends who mourn them; those who have suffered life-changing injuries to body, mind and spirit and refugees, many of whom have been exploited and who have faced long, dangerous journeys, only to face rejection by potential host nations. Grant all of them such practical support and encouragement so they may begin to rebuild their lives with hope and determination.

Heavenly Father, we pray for the healing of victims of COVID 19 and their families and friends. We thank you for the NHS, the care sector and all key-workers who have striven bravely to support us throughout the past five months, often at considerable personal risk. May the NHS and care sector receive all the support and equipment they need to heal the sick and vulnerable as they grow to meet the changing needs of our society. Help us to play our part in defeating Coronavirus and reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can all face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your saving grace.

God of wellbeing and wholeness, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them. Grant them both comfort in their distress and a sense of being valued for who they are, despite their brokenness. Lord, hear our prayer for neighbours who are lonely, anxious, overworked, or who feel undervalued and unloved as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one.

In a time of silence, we offer the names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will know their needs and that you will reach out to them in compassion. Help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and peace.

Lord, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide: make us all one, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of everybody. Help us plan for the ending of lockdown, as we face many serious issues that have arisen during the past four months. Unite us in love and action, so we can continue to bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and often hostile world.

Abba, heavenly Father, look upon us, our friends and families with loving-kindness. Keep us from harm and may the power of the Holy Spirit help us resist the temptation to sin. Most of all, may all that we do and say, reflect your grace and goodness upon this sin-darkened world. Amen.

The writer of our third hymn, Karen Lafferty, wrote our next hymn during a financial crisis in 1972, when she was full of anxiety. She turned to Christ in prayer and sought solace by reading the Bible. When she saw Matthew 6, she realised that she would overcome the situation with God's help – and she did!

She said this: 'My life had to be centred around the promises of God's Word and be living proof that a person CAN take God at his word. The lyrics of my songs, coupled with my simple melodies, communicate these truths into the hearts and minds of those who listen.' We shall sing hymn number 254, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God'.

**1. Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

**2. Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

**3. Man shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: Chorus:

*Alleluia, Alleluia,
Alleluia, Allelu—, Alleluia!*

© *Karen Lafferty (born 1948)*

The Old Testament reading is from 1Kings chapter 3 verses 5 to 12

At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said,

"Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Solomon answered,

"You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. Now, O LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him,

"Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 13 verses 31 to 33 & 44 to 52

He told them another parable:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches."

He told them still another parable:

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

"Yes," they replied.

He said to them,

"Therefore, every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old." Amen.

"The kingdom of God is mercy and grace, / The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place, / The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share, / And hope is awakened in place of despair." We sing Bryn Rees' vision of the kingdom of God. Hymn number 255, 'The kingdom of God is justice and joy,'

**1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.**

**2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,
The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair.**

**3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.**

**4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all!**

© Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}

Sermon: *Parables of the Kingdom of God: Matthew 13*

St. Matthew's gospel was written for the Jewish Christian community in Antioch during the last decade of the First Century when serious persecution of the faith by the Roman Empire was under way. It had started during the rule of Emperor Nero, thirty years earlier, but was about to be followed by what was called "The Reign of Terror" at the behest of Emperor Domitian between 93 and 96 A.D.. Thus Matthew's retelling of the first two of Jesus' parables were intended to steady the nerves of members of the Church who were wavering, afraid that they would be swept aside by the might of Rome – all would have remembered the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 after the Jewish rebellion.

The parable of the mustard seed predicted that a huge bush – the Church – would grow from a tiny number of people, representing the mustard seed. Certainly, whilst a mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, its development into a plant four or five metres high is remarkable, but so was the growth of the church from the Day of Pentecost when the hundred and twenty frightened and indecisive followers in that locked upper room in Jerusalem experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and poured outside, proclaiming the glory of God in Christ Jesus. St. Peter, inspired by the Spirit, preached his first sermon, as a result of which three thousand men and unnumbered women were baptised in Jesus' name. Luke recorded how the Good News spread and the church grew with great speed. The reference to birds nesting in the mustard plant, could mean evil people would find shelter within the Church, but it probably is Jesus' coded way of saying that Gentiles – all comers – would be welcomed into fellowship, not just the original Jews.

The following parable of a small quantity of yeast permeating a large quantity of flour – three measures would produce enough bread for one hundred people – again foresees the dynamic growth of the Church which could not be stopped even by the greatest superpower of its age. However, having given some encouragement, Matthew retold two parables which were a challenge to his listeners and are still a challenge to us two millennia later!

What price are we prepared to pay to be part of the kingdom of heaven? In the first parable a man – possibly a hired labourer on one Denarius a day – discovered treasure in a field, reburied it and in great joy sold all he had, so he could buy the field and claim the treasure. Whilst we may well question his integrity, his joyful willingness to commit all he had in order to claim the prize, is the moral of the story: are we ready to offer all for God's kingdom?

The second account of the merchant who discovered a wonderful pearl and sold everything he had to buy it, is not about Christians giving up all for the kingdom, but of God's willingness to give his most precious Son to bring Adam's fallen race into a new, perfect covenant by his death and resurrection. If we consider what God gave for our salvation: Jesus emptying himself of all heavenly attributes, except love, to take our flesh and his self-sacrifice at Calvary; what could we give to match such amazing grace? The moral is clear: if God is willing to give all he has to demonstrate his love for and commitment to us, dare we remain cold-hearted and uncommitted in the face of his call? Remember these words from our **Covenant Prayer**: **'I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal'**. Do we mean these words when we say them, or do we hope we won't be called to honour our pledge? Here's an example of somebody who did God's will. Anthony Cooper ought to have been a lucky child, because his father was Lord Shaftesbury, a wealthy land-owner and an important member of the House of Lords. However, neither Anthony's father nor mother had time for him. They were too keen on drinking and fancy parties to care for their son, so he was sent away to Harrow public school where what he saw at a pauper's funeral changed his life.

A party of drunken men staggered along the road, laughing and singing as they carried the coffin on their shoulders. They were so drunk that they even fell over and dropped the coffin, before climbing unsteadily to their feet and continuing towards the cemetery. Fourteen year-old Anthony decided then and there to devote his life to improving the conditions of the poor in this country.

When he became a M.P. at twenty-five, many people expected him to have a glittering social career like his parents, but they were in for a surprise. He investigated the conditions in which child workers lived and died as a result of cruelty and accidents, before campaigning for laws that would protect them. It was not a popular cause, so Anthony was bitterly denounced not only by factory owners, mine owners, chimney sweeps who made boys climb up chimneys and mill owners, but by lords and ladies, including his own parents, who withdrew their financial support. As an MP in the mid 1800s, Anthony received no pay, so he had to rely upon his own small income because his father continued to refuse to help him as long as he fought for the rights of the poor.

Nevertheless, his campaigning began to change the hearts and minds of many MPs and, when he became Lord Shaftesbury on the death of his father, he changed the outlook of many noble lords. Unlike his parents, who lived only for pleasure and power, Anthony Lord Shaftesbury devoted fifty years in Parliament to serving the poor, powerless and forgotten of our world. He is usually remembered for ending child labour, working against slavery, for trying to improve housing in our industrial towns and for laying the foundations for children to receive an education by being President of the Ragged Schools' Union for thirty-nine years. Let us not forget that his service was motivated by his love of God and a strong sense that Jesus had called him to serve, whether or not he was unpopular and poor as a result.

Let us remember and celebrate all that Jesus has done, is doing and will continue to do for us and the priceless good news he has commissioned us to share with our neighbours throughout the world. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we look to the end of lockdown, the re-opening of churches and the new reality of life in a post-COVID world, there is going to be so much need in our communities: unemployment; bereavement; mental and spiritual ill-health; loss of clubs, groups and amenities. However, it is time for us, the Church, to play our part in offering healing and hope by working together and with partner organizations, remembering that what we have to give can be the yeast that brings about big changes, for we are acting in the power of the Holy Spirit, not our own. Amen.

We shall close our worship as we sing a hymn by Jacqui Jones, a South African Christian composer and singer, who now lives as a vicar's wife in New Zealand. I hope you can say 'Amen' to its opening line: otherwise I've just wasted an hour of your Sunday! Hymn number 662, 'Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?'

1. Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Are you still prepared to follow?

**Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
Though the way be rough and narrow? Chorus:**

***Will you walk the path that will cost you much
And embrace the pain and sorrow?***

*Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
The disciples of tomorrow?*

**2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
When the multitudes are silent?**

**Will you make a choice to stand your ground
When the crowds are turning violent? *Chorus:***

**3. In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?**

**Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
Will you share your faith with the faithless? *Chorus:***

**4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
And believe it could be different?**

**Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? *Chorus:***

*We will walk the path that will cost us much
And embrace the pain and sorrow.*

*We will trust in One who entrusts to us
The disciples of tomorrow.*

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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.**