

A Service for 26th September, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 11

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1998 by Brian Doerksen, a Canadian singer-songwriter, when he was only thirty-three years old. His earliest hymns were published when he was in his mid-twenties. Hymn number 24, 'Come, now is the time to worship'.

Come, now is the time to worship.

Come, now is the time to give your heart.

Come, just as you are to worship.

Come, just as you are before your God, come.

One day every tongue

Will confess you are God,

One day every knee will bow.

Still, the greatest treasure remains

For those who gladly choose You now.

Come, now is the time to worship

© Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Let us pray

Almighty God, the beauty of the earth and skies, particularly in Autumn, are clear evidence of your creative, limitless power which formed the universe and all that lives within it. Faithful, compassionate God, the harvest of ripened crops proclaims your boundless love that sustains us. God our Saviour, the cross reminds us of the redemptive grace of Christ Jesus, your Son, who lived amongst us, was crucified and rose from the tomb to break the power of sin and death and to restore our relationship with you.

We pray that you will accept and bless our worship today. Take away anxiety and distractions, so we can offer the best we have in our adoration and praise to you, in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say "Merciful Lord", please respond with "Forgive us".

Everlasting Lord, we have come to thank you for all you have been, are, and shall be in the future. Thank you for your gift of life, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world in which we live, for the many blessings we have received from you and which you continue to bestow upon us, but above all else, thank you for loving us even when we stray from you, when we are loveless and unlovable, for you seek us out and restore us.

'Merciful Lord' 'Forgive us'.

Heavenly Father, forgive us if we are too absorbed, or too busy to hear your call, or respond to your voice. Help us to be guided by you, Lord, for we know that whereas your love for us is boundless and unfailing, we don't always share your love with our neighbours and can be judgmental of the way other people look or behave. Lord, in

sorrow we confess that we are selfish, self-centred and hard-hearted at times, so we come to ask for both forgiveness and the grace to change our ways for the better.

'Merciful Lord' 'Forgive us'.

Lord, there are times when we fail to see the gifts and graces of those around us, when we criticize, undermine, or let down other people, whereas you see the potential of everybody. Teach us to see people around us through Christ Jesus' eyes, so we can love and serve them as he does.

'Merciful Lord' 'Forgive us'.

Gracious Lord, you help us grow and develop in faith and works. You offer the promise of forgiveness and new life. Help us to both accept your love and to work with you to build up your Kingdom, in response to your steadfast mercy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave us:

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 John Greenleaf Whittier, an American journalist and anti-slavery campaigner before the American Civil War. This was not intended to be a hymn, but was part of a long poem criticising the use by Vedic priests of an hallucinogenic drink called soma. Moreover, Mr. Whittier was a Quaker and they do not usually sing hymns. Fortunately, his words were set to the melody "Repton" composed by Sir Hubert Parry, when he was organist at Repton Public School and the combination has made it one of the nation's favourite hymns. Hymn number 495, 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'.

**1. Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways;
Re-clothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.**

**2. In simple trust like theirs who heard,
Beside the Syrian sea,
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word,
Rise up and follow thee.**

**3. O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love.**

**4. With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of thy call,
As noiseless let thy blessing fall
As fell thy manna down.**

**5. Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.**

**6. Breathe through the heats of our desire,
Thy coolness and thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire,
Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire,
O still small voice of calm!**

© *John Greenleaf Whittier {1807 – 1892}*

We come to our prayers of intercession.

Heavenly Father, although you have blessed us with this beautiful, self-sustaining planet which should meet the needs of all, daily news reports, remind us of its brokenness, most of which is the result of human failure, greed, cruelty, pride, selfishness and indifference. Lord, grant us all we need to comfort and support neighbours who are troubled or needy – acting as Jesus would. However, in situations where our best will not be enough, we pray that you will reach out to people who can bring about healing and wholeness, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, guide and inspire world leaders to use their power justly and compassionately, seeking peaceful resolutions to disputes, rather than turning to military action. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and intolerance across the world, especially in Afghanistan where allied troops have left and the population faces Taliban rule once more. The situation is so grave that it is difficult to know what to pray for, other than that those who have been evacuated may find safe refuge and compassionate treatment from their hosts. May those trapped within Afghanistan be protected from the worst excesses the world witnessed twenty years ago. Loving God, breathe your Spirit of peace upon mankind; comfort and support all who are suffering the effects of man's inhumanity to man and help us remember that we are all made one in Christ.

We pray, too, for refugees who are so desperate they are willing to put their lives in danger by trying to cross the Channel in barely sea-worthy craft. Again, Lord, we know we don't have answers to the situation, but we pray that you will guide our leaders to adopt a humane approach to these asylum-seekers.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

Lord of healing and hope, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Grant them 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 need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued even in the midst of their brokenness.

Remember in your mercy our neighbours who are suffering the effects of this pandemic: people who are lonely, afraid, unemployed; those who feel undervalued and unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, particularly during this pandemic. In a

time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care. Lord, 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, where they may find healing, courage, comfort, hope and peace.

Sovereign God, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide, especially as we begin to emerge from the shadow of COVID19: make us all one, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world. Grant that every member of the Church may truly and humbly serve you and that the life of Christ may be revealed in all we do and say.

We ask your blessing upon people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they be successful and safe in their endeavours, dear Lord.

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers and thereby glorifying your name, through our Saviour's Name. Amen.

'For the love of God is broader / Than the measures of the mind; / And the heart of the Eternal / Is most wonderfully kind. // But we make his love too narrow / By false limits of our own; / And we magnify his strictness / With a zeal he will not own.'

Wonderful words by Frederick Faber who founded Brompton Oratory after falling out with Cardinal Newman at the Oratory in Edgbaston. Hymn number 416, "There's a wideness in God's mercy,"

1. There's a wideness in God's mercy

**Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in his justice,
Which is more than liberty.**

**2. There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.**

**3. There is grace enough for thousands
Of new worlds as great as this;
There is room for fresh creations
In that upper home of bliss.**

**4. For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of the mind;
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.**

**5. But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.**

**6. If our love were but more simple,
We should take him at his word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord.**

© Frederick William Faber {1814 – 63}

"Singing the Faith" version

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 9 verses 38 to 50

“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'

Everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other." Amen.

Sermon: “Whoever is not against us is for us” Mark 9:40

This passage shows the disciple John – later called the apostle of love – in an unfavourable light. He and some other disciples had seen a man performing either healings or exorcisms in Jesus’ name and tried to stop him simply because he was not one of the Twelve. Jesus’ response was far kinder than John deserved, for he not only said the man ought not be stopped, but he observed that anyone who does good in his name is hardly likely to be an enemy, or is likely to say anything defamatory about him. He pressed home the point that **“Whoever is not against us is for us.”** In other words, the works of the Holy Spirit should not be opposed, for they glorify both Jesus and God the Father. Indeed, Jesus could easily have turned on John and demanded to know who he thought he was, deciding who could and could not follow him.

This story has an important message for all of us, for it deals with being part of the ‘in-crowd’ and being an outsider. It is too easy to exclude others from friendship groups, societies, clubs and activities for the flimsiest of reasons. One of the most notorious was the treatment of a number of black Christians who came to this country from Jamaica on **“SS Windrush” in 1948**. Naturally, they wanted to worship, so they went to churches where they’d disembarked. At the end of one service, the vicar greeted them as they left, saying,

“It was very nice to see you here today, but please don’t come again. You have upset the congregation by being here!”

Imagine their feelings, being rejected from church because of the colour of their skin – probably at the same time that they were finding it difficult to get lodgings for the same reason! They could probably come to terms with the ignorant prejudices of landlords, but the church was a different matter! The result has been the formation and growth of ‘black’ churches – from which white and other ethnic groups are not excluded – which are still thriving, while many of the churches that didn’t want **‘different people’** in their congregations are struggling to survive, or have closed. Despite anti-discrimination laws, some people still find ways of excluding those who are different and will continue to do so unless they are either challenged directly, or unless we set an example of acceptance of all-comers in our daily lives. It is not always easy, but it is certainly what Jesus wants of us.

This story challenges us especially at this time, when our society seems more divided into **'us and them'** than ever: even though we have left the EU, Brexit is still a divisive issue for many people; leading political parties are still addressing claims of anti-semitism and islamophobia, while, in spite of recent appointments, the Anglican Church is still divided over women bishops and gay bishops. Lest Methodists feel smug, we just have problems with the idea of bishops in the first place! Moreover, we know that the English Defence League is active in many parts of the country, especially in the Midlands and North Western England. However, prejudice can manifest itself in many insidious forms – against red-heads, or the plump, bald, old, or disabled. I know we have anti-discrimination laws, but these usually only come into effect after somebody has suffered discrimination.

In his ministry, Jesus was open to all people: the ceremonially unclean; the despised, marginalised, sinful of society; Romans; Gentiles and even Samaritans. A few weeks ago, the Lectionary included the account of the Canaanite woman who pleaded with Jesus to cure her sick daughter. Christ replied provocatively, in terms that would probably have been branded 'racist' by our Media. **"Let us first feed the children. It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"**, the traditional response she would have received from ordinary Jewish males. However, our translations are unhelpful, for Jesus was actually satirising the Jewish prejudice by using the word **'kunarion'** meaning 'puppies' rather than **'kuon'** or dogs. By softening the insult, Jesus invited the feisty mother to come back at him with, **"Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers."** Our Lord was so delighted by her reply that he acceded to her request and sent her on her way with a blessing. Jesus did not treat the Canaanite woman as a member of a despised group of foreigners, but as an individual with a profound need to be helped. He cast off traditional attitudes, which his followers had expected him to observe, offering grace and mercy instead of bitter rejection. Here was the real life version of the parable of the Good Samaritan with Jesus, the Jew, showing compassion to the Gentile, rather than vice versa.

No one, not even the robber crucified alongside him, or those who crucified him was outside the scope of Christ's grace. The passage reminds us that God loves everyone, irrespective of colour, creed, gender, or customs, not just a chosen few. Jesus lived, was crucified and was raised for all people, not just the Jews. Therefore, we must avoid thinking ourselves superior to others, writing off people as 'worthless' or as 'rejects'. Instead, we are called to treat them as Jesus did with the Canaanite woman.

Many years ago, a monastery fell on hard times: nobody offered himself as a novice, so it looked as though the community would become extinct. The abbot visited the local bishop and discussed the situation with him. On his return to the monastery, the abbot was asked what the bishop had said. The abbot looked gravely at them and said, **"Remember, the Messiah is among you!"**

Gradually, the monks began to treat one another more carefully, just in case one of them was the Messiah and so a remarkable change occurred within the community. Outsiders began to visit the monastery once more, to worship and trade. Before long, new novices presented themselves, because they saw value, kingdom value, in what the community was working for. Old squabbles, power struggles, self-interest had been replaced by peace, reconciliation and mutual concern for one another's well-being. **Let us learn to live with the thought that Christ is among us, so we may answer his call to serve all our neighbours, not just those we favour, or with whom we are**

comfortable, for unless we are inclusive, we will turn away our brothers and sisters, even though they want to serve our Saviour, too. Amen.

We shall close our worship with a hymn by Jacqui Jones, a South African Christian composer and singer, who now lives as a vicar's wife in New Zealand. 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.