

A service for 27th August, 2023 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 138 verses 1 to 3

I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul. Amen.

We begin our service with a hymn by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a former Methodist Minister whose life almost spanned the entire Twentieth Century and who wrote most of his hymns after he sat down as a minister. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'

**1. God is here! As we his people
Meet to offer praise and prayer,
May we find in fuller measure
What it is in Christ we share.
Here, as in the world around us,
All our varied skills and arts
Wait the coming of the Spirit
Into open minds and hearts.**

**2. Here are symbols to remind us
Of our lifelong need of grace;
Here are table, font and pulpit;
Here the cross has central place.
Here in honesty of preaching,
Here in silence, as in speech,
Here in newness and renewal,
God the Spirit comes to each.**

**3. Here our children find a welcome
In the Shepherd's flock and fold:
Here as bread and wine are taken,
Christ sustains us, as of old.
Here the servants of the Servant
Seek in worship to explore
What it means in daily living
To believe and to adore.**

**4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,
In an age of change and doubt,
Keep us faithful to the gospel,
Help us work your purpose out.
Here, in this day's dedication,
All we have to give, receive:
We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe!**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Let us turn to the Lord in prayer.

Creator God, all glory, honour, power and praise are yours, for you are the Living Word who spoke this universe into life, you are the compassionate Wisdom that formed the eco-system that sustains life and you are Grace who favoured us with stewardship over

our planet. Your love for us is such that when we had gone astray, you sought to draw us close once more by taking our mortal frame and living amongst us as Christ Jesus. Jesus not only taught us about your nature and how we ought to live, he became the Perfect Sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. His resurrection three days later broke the power of death and he offers us everlasting life through faith in his redemptive love. As we come to worship you, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may give our hearts and minds to you.

We are here to offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; our work and rest; our homes, friends and families; the opportunities and experiences that have fulfilled us, besides challenges that have tested us and shaped our character. Most of all, thank you for loving us even though we often fail to love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. Forgive us for our sins and help us to amend our ways, for Jesus said if we repent in his name, you will pardon us.

Merciful Lord, as you hear and answer our prayers, we believe that you have forgiven us and call us to follow you once again. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by serving our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful 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.

William Sparrow-Simpson, who wrote the words of our next hymn also wrote the words for John Stainer's "Crucifixion" which was first performed on 24th February, 1887. Indeed, this hymn comes at the end of that august work, but it was not included in a hymnal until 1969. We shall sing hymn number 341, 'All for Jesus – all for Jesus,'

**1. All for Jesus – all for Jesus,
This our song shall ever be:
For we have no hope, nor Saviour,
If we have not hope in thee.**

**2. All for Jesus – thou wilt give us
Strength to serve thee, hour by hour;
None can move us from thy presence,
While we trust thy love and power.**

**3. All for Jesus – thou hast loved us;
All for Jesus – thou hast died;
All for Jesus – thou art with us;
All for Jesus crucified.**

**4. All for Jesus – all for Jesus –
This the church's song must be;
Till, at last, we all are gathered
One in love and one in thee.**

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say ‘Your kingdom come’, please respond with, ‘Your will be done’.

Lord of all, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but in circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible. We ask you to warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that they govern justly and mercifully and seek fairness for all-comers. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we see others as you see them, as your children who are to be protected and nurtured. Help us to be willing to work together in mutual trust, to always seek the common good, rather than our own selfish desires and to share justly the earth’s resources, rather than fighting over them.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

God of love, truth and justice, we grieve for countries afflicted by disasters resulting from climate change and for our part in the failure of humankind to act as faithful stewards of the planet you gave us. The evidence is here before us: droughts and famine; unbearable heatwaves and wildfires; devastating floods, exceptionally powerful storms, depletion of resources and melting ice-caps. In the last fortnight we have seen the devastation and many deaths wrought by wildfires on Maui in Hawaii. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles, by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather and so our descendants will inherit and habitable world.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

Lord of shalom, we pray for the establishment of peace throughout the world and for the end of fighting particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless with success the work of peacemakers and everybody who works with victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, for they are worthy to be called your sons and daughters.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

God of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: 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 names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us play our part by offering them practical support 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, hope, strength and peace.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

Holy God, grant that this church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we may bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus’ name.

‘Your kingdom come’, ‘Your will be done’.

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 good lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

I shall always associate our next hymn with the late Wendy Dudley, a renowned, fearless, local preacher from the old Stourbridge and Brierley Hill Circuit, who used the next hymn just before the offertory at a church whose congregation was somewhat parsimonious. She quoted the lines, "Take my silver and my gold, / Not a mite would I withhold", then added, "I trust you value Jesus at more than the price of a packet of cigarettes?" It was reported there was a record collection as a result! We shall sing hymn number 566, 'Take my life, and let it be'.

1. Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to thee;
Take my moments and my days,
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.
2. Take my hands, and let them move
At the impulse of thy love;
Take my feet, and let them be
Swift and beautiful for thee.
3. Take my voice, and let me sing
Always, only, for my King;
Take my lips, and let them be
Filled with messages from thee.
4. Take my silver and my gold,
Not a mite would I withhold;
Take my intellect, and use
Every power as thou shalt choose.
5. Take my will, and make it thine;
It shall be no longer mine;
Take my heart – it is thine own;
It shall be thy royal throne.
6. Take my love, my Lord, I pour
At thy feet its treasure-store;
Take myself, and I will be
Ever, only, all for thee.

© Frances Ridley Havergal {1836 – 1879}

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them,
"But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered,
"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him,
"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1749, entitled, ‘Hymns for a Preacher of the Gospel,’ improved by elder brother, John. Hymn number 661, ‘Give me the faith which can remove’.

1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o’erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.

2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.

3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners’ friend.

4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Sermon: St. Peter’s Confession of Christ – *Matthew 16:13 – 20*

I like Simon Peter for, in many ways he was just as fallible as we are. He made mistakes, said the wrong things – got into trouble, but he always got back up and tried again; sometimes he was slow to pick up ideas, but he kept on trying to learn; he was known to speak rashly and acted before considering the consequences, but only through his enthusiasm. Above all else, although he was accepted as leader of the Church, Peter was humble enough to allow stories to be written about himself that weren’t creditable, so that in him we may see the Church’s human face, not an alabaster image created by spin-doctors!

Peter’s three years’ discipleship with Jesus was rather like a rollercoaster ride at Alton Towers. Today’s reading probably shows him at his most successful during Jesus’ ministry, because guided by the Holy Spirit he confessed Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed. It was while they were near **Caesarea Philippi**, that the Lord asked his disciples who the people thought he was. They replied that many thought he was **John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet**. Then Jesus asked them who they thought he was and Peter immediately declared, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

The answer earned Jesus' praise and he declared the revelation came from God, not from human sources, for it was evident that Peter had not carefully weighed up all the evidence until he was left with the single option that Jesus was God's anointed. **Peter had based his conclusion purely on faith.** Christ added that Peter was to be the Rock on which he'd build his church – and probably made them all laugh, for he was playing on the words **Petros**, Greek for **Peter** and **Petra**, which means a **rock**. There is irony inasmuch that **petros** is a stone, or rock that can be detached and moved, whilst **petra** means a solidly-based mass of rock. The gospels show how Peter was moved by circumstances, emotions and fortune, for within minutes he was in disgrace for arguing against Jesus' announcement of his imminent passion, death and resurrection, none of which fitted Peter's idea of the Messiah. Discipleship wasn't easy for Peter, either!

Simon Peter and his brother, Andrew, were ordinary Jews, working as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. We know Andrew took Simon along to meet him. Christ instantly recognised his qualities, for he said he'd call him Peter henceforth, punning for the first time that he'd be Rock on which the Church would be established. It is remarkable that anybody would have taken a fisherman from such an obscure, unpromising province, which was regarded contemptuously by the people of Jerusalem, as the first leader of the movement that changed the world and its history, but Jesus did. Perhaps Jesus' decision was based upon Peter's enthusiasm, or insight, or his willingness to go where angels feared to tread, or to speak when silence would be safer; **or perhaps it was Peter's sincerity that moved Christ.**

From the start Peter was in Jesus' inner circle, with **James & John**. It was Peter's mother-in-law who Jesus healed in an early miracle. Peter witnessed the raising of Jairus' daughter and it was he who asked Christ to explain the meanings of several parables and questioned Jesus' teaching about forgiveness – not because he was awkward, but because he wanted to understand the Lord fully. When the inner circle was with Jesus at the transfiguration, it was Peter who broke the awed silence to ask if they should build shelters for **Christ, Moses and Elijah**. It was Peter alone who had sufficient faith and enthusiasm to ask Jesus if he could walk on the water like him, even though he lost his nerve and had to be rescued by our Lord. **Remember, at least he tried: the others merely cowered in the boat!**

Even Peter's greatest failure after Jesus' betrayal and arrest isn't wholly discreditable. The disciples' tiredness was evident from their inability to stay awake to keep watch in the Garden of Gethsemane, so Peter's attempts to defend Jesus with a sword shows commendable steadfastness, though Jesus rebuked him for resisting with violence. When the other followers fled, only Peter was brave enough to follow the mob into the **courtyard of Caiaphas' palace**, for he wanted to see what happened to his Master and friend. What followed is a warning to all who boast, for shortly before Christ's arrest, for Peter had declared that, even if the others deserted him, he wouldn't. Jesus replied that, in the event, Peter would deny knowing him three times before the cock crowed twice and that's precisely what happened. How bitterly must Peter have regretted his failure of nerve, not only for denying his friend, but because he thought it certain he'd forfeited right to be the Church's Rock.

He returned, heart-broken, to that locked room in Jerusalem, remaining there while Jesus was crucified. He was still hiding inside when Mary Magdalene beat frantically on the door, two days later, crying that the Lord's body had been taken away. At once, both Peter and John left the house, disregarding all danger, and raced to the tomb. Although John hesitated at the entrance, Peter impulsively rushed inside and saw

the neatly-folded burial clothes **which pointed to resurrection, not the theft of a body**. Peter was the first male follower to whom the risen Christ appeared, but he still doubted that he'd be allowed to lead the Church until the incident in **John's gospel**, when Jesus breakfasted with his disciples on the shore of Lake Galilee and asked Peter three times, **"Do you love me?"** Each time Peter affirmed his love, he had to face his failures, so he learned that, to become a true disciple, he needed to trust in Christ, not in own strength. **At that point Jesus commissioned him to tend his sheep, to become the Church's Pastor.**

Remember how, at Pentecost, Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, preached his first sermon, resulting in more than three thousand people being baptised in Jesus' name. I confess feeling a little jealous, for all my first sermon achieved was several burnt dinners in Brierley Hill! Working in the power of the Holy Spirit with Paul and the apostles, Peter helped to found the movement that's changed world history and at the end, Peter's nerve held when Nero's persecution of Christians led to his crucifixion. According to tradition, Peter was crucified upside down, because he said he was unworthy to die in the same way as his Master.

Peter's discipleship gives us hope, for he was far from perfect, but never lost his zeal for the Lord and was able to accept his failures as well as his successes. Therefore, let us be enthusiastic in our discipleship, not worn down by routine and traditions. Let us pick ourselves up when things go wrong. **Let us keep on travelling with Christ, even when the path is uncertain, or rough. Above all else, let us accept ourselves for who we are, faults and all, confident that Jesus loves us fully, just as we are. Amen.**

We close our service as we sing another hymn by Revd. Fred Pratt Green. 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.**

© F. Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}

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.