

A service for 27th September, 2020 (StF)

Call to Worship: A Jewish Prayer on entering a place of worship.

And we, due to your great kindness, will come into your house, and, in awe of you, we will worship, facing towards your holy Temple. "We will go to the house of the Lord in a crowd". How good are your tents, Jacob, your dwellings, Israel. Lord, we love the dwelling of your house and the place where your glory rests. And we will worship and bow and bend the knee before the Lord our Maker. And as for us, may our prayer come to you in an acceptable time; Sovereign Lord, in your great kindness, answer us with the truth of your salvation. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn, written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a Methodist Minister who was born in 1903 and died in 2000. Hymn number 6, 'Father, we love you,'

**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. In our prayer of adoration and thanksgiving, when I say 'Almighty God', please respond with 'all glory, honour, power and praise are yours forever'.

Lord of all, you are the Living Word who spoke our universe into being, who formed this world and all that lives upon it. It is you who created mankind and entrusted the stewardship of this world to our care.

Almighty God **all glory, honour, power and praise are yours forever.**

Faithful God, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and provide our daily needs. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers and a conscience to discern between right and wrong. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

Almighty God **all glory, honour, power and praise are yours forever.**

Gracious God, you know everything about us: our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, our hopes and fears and yet you love us so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, so by his life and teaching, we might understand how you want us live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Almighty God **all glory, honour, power and praise are yours forever.**

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled through your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit and truth.

Almighty God

all glory, honour, power and praise are yours forever. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Gracious God', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things we enjoy and experiences that fulfil us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are loveless and unlovable.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we do. In Jesus' precious name, help us to amend our ways, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. May we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

Let us say the prayer our Lord taught 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.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Graham Kendrick for the Spring Harvest of 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant. 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)

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

God most gracious and holy, it is good to worship here after such a long interval: to share fellowship and to come before you in our discipleship. We thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout lockdown 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 by caring for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion so we may serve as you call us to, but in many circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, this church, the other churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Help your Church as it begins to open its buildings and as it plans for the ending of lockdown, for many are facing serious issues that have arisen during the past six months. 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 reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for peace around the world where acts of war, terrorism and persecution cause so many deaths, so much destruction and despair. Inspire the leaders of the nations of his world to rule wisely and compassionately, to seek justice and peace, rather than resorting to violence when they cannot have their way. We pray especially for an end to conflict in countries such as Syria, Libya, Belarus and Sudan. Compassionate God, help resolve situations that seem hopeless and let your love overcome the hatred in human hearts. We pray for an end of grievous oppression of black people in the USA, as we examine our consciences about the treatment of minority groups in this country, too.

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

need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout the treatment they receive. Gracious God, reach out to people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, especially in these stressful times. Comfort them in their distress, reassure them when they are confused and let them feel loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, hear our prayer for neighbours who are lonely, afraid, overworked, unemployed, for whom lockdown has strained their relationship to breaking point, or who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one when funerals are so constrained that comfort is almost impossible to achieve. 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, we ask you help us to offer them practical support and friendship and that you will hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and enduring peace.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. 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 vaccine that works. Help us to patiently observe guidelines laid down by the Government, even though we may find them difficult and confusing. Dispel scepticism and reckless behaviour in parts of the country where tighter restrictions have been imposed, so that, by obeying the rules, the rate of infection is controlled and help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

Lord of all mercies, hear our plea for the victims of recent natural disasters, especially the wildfires in the USA. We pray for everybody involved that they can receive effective aid as soon as possible.

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 boldly take the light of the gospel to a broken and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our next hymn is believed by some commentators to have been the Wesleys' Conversion hymn, rather than 'Where shall my wondering soul begin' and it was certainly a favourite of John Wesley. It was certainly my conversion hymn when I sang it at Cannon Street Baptist Church as a sixteen-year-old at a crossroad in my faith. Hymn number 345, 'And can it be'.

**1. And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain?
For me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That thou, my God, shouldst die for me?**

**2. 'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the first-born seraph tries
To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,
Let angel minds enquire no more.**

**3. He left his Father's throne above –
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free;
For, O my God, it found out me!**

**4. Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light,
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee.**

**5. No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in him, is mine!
Alive in him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own!**

© Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

Our first reading is Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 13

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 21 verses 23 to 32

Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while he was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him.

“By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked. “And who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replied,

“I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves and said,

“If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will ask, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But if we say, ‘From men’—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet.”

So they answered Jesus,

“We don’t know.”

Then he said,

“Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things. What do you think?

There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered,

‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them,

“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.” Amen.

The writer of our next hymn, Edward Perronet was made an ordained preacher by John Wesley himself, following an incident in Bolton during 1749, after a mob had rolled Edward in the mud whilst he was accompanying Wesley on a visit to Northern England. Having been undaunted by this incident and also an attack on their lodgings, Edward Perronet was thus considered fit to preach for Methodism! We shall sing hymn number 342, ‘All hail the power of Jesu’s name!’

1. All hail the power of Jesu’s name!

**Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown him Lord of all.**

**2. You seed of Israel’s chosen race,
You ransomed of the fall,
Hail him who saves you by his grace,
And crown him Lord of all.**

**3. Hail him, the heir of David’s line
Whom David Lord did call,
The God incarnate, Man divine,
And crown him Lord of all.**

**4. Let every kindred, every tribe
On this terrestrial ball,
To him all majesty ascribe,
And crown him Lord of all.**

**5. O that with yonder sacred throng
We at his feet may fall,
Join in the everlasting song,
And crown him Lord of all!**

© Edward Perronet (1726 – 1792)

Sermon: “By what authority are you doing these things?” they asked.’ Matthew 21:23

When Boris Johnson won the last election with a majority of eighty, he must have been exultant. After all, he could push through Brexit after months of overt power-struggles within and without his party. There would be no more defeats in Parliament and he was confident he could strike a deal with Europe, so what could possibly go wrong? Then along came COVID19, a pandemic that has wrought havoc across the world and occupied our attention even more than European matters! Mind you, current problems have given the Media an excuse to challenge the Prime Minister’s authority, showing starkly that, even with a huge majority, maintaining power is difficult.

There are some parallels with our reading from Matthew, for Jesus had entered Jerusalem to the acclamation of crowds, as a Messianic figure. at the beginning of Pessach, or Passover, a festival when feelings ran high and rioting often occurred. Then he had driven the money-changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals from the temple, exclaiming, **“It is written, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer,’ but you are making it a ‘den of robbers!’”** Clearly, the chief priests and elders felt the authority of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, was being threatened by this Nazarene, whom they saw as a demagogue, a false Messiah. It is too easy to simply dismiss the Sanhedrin as stupid, but their prejudice had some foundation.

For a start, Jesus came from the region of Galilee, where many Gentiles lived, so Galilean Jews living there were considered inferior to Judeans. In addition, in the recent past a number of false Messiahs had arrived in Jerusalem from Galilee, which was a hot-bed of anti-Roman agitators. To the chief priests and elders, Christ had the potential to lead an uprising against Rome which would provoke savage retribution. Although the Sanhedrin may not have been stupid, it was spiritually blind, for the teaching of John the Baptist was known to them and John had declared that he was preparing the way for the coming Messiah, calling for repentance and baptising huge crowds. Despite Jesus having preached and healed in a way that pointed to his being the Son of God, the Jewish Establishment, wanted incontrovertible evidence – signs of Messianic might. Yet Jesus’ outreach to groups they despised, the tax-collectors, prostitutes, the ceremonially unclean, even Gentiles and Samaritans merely served to confirm their opinion that he was a false prophet, so their only interest was to trap him into making a seditious, or blasphemous remark, so they could destroy him.

That is why Jesus’ reply to the Sanhedrin’s challenge to his authority was remarkable. He agreed to answer their question, on condition they answered his: **“John’s baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or from men?”** Of course, if they replied, **‘From heaven’**, Jesus would ask why they didn’t believe John’s teaching about the Messiah: on the other hand, if they said, **‘From men’**, they would outrage the crowd, who believed John the Baptist was a prophet, thus inspired by God. They saw that they could not answer Jesus’ question and so were silenced, but Jesus then launched into an attack with his parable of the two sons. In it a vineyard owner asked his two sons to spend the day working in his vineyard; the first was rude and rebellious in his refusal, but later thought better of his answer, turned back and did his father’s will, whilst the second, who pretended to be obedient, went and did as he pleased. The parable showed two groups of people: sinners who repented – and the self-righteous who appear obedient in words, but whose deeds show their true feelings – and their disobedience.

When Jesus asked which of the sons obeyed their father, the high priests and elders realised that Jesus was teaching that penitent sinners would become members of God’s kingdom, whilst they and others who had heard John’s message but refused to

act on it would not. They were guilty of pride, rejecting Jesus because of his outreach to the untouchables in society. Indeed, they could not – or would not – see that the man whose authority they challenged was God himself in human form – in Charles Wesley’s words, **‘He left his Father’s throne above – / So free, so infinite his grace – / Emptied himself of all but love, / And bled for Adam’s helpless race:’** Are we guilty of similar pride when we fail to answer Christ’s call to respond to his grace by serving him?

In the Lerner and Loewe musical, “My Fair Lady”, the heroine, Eliza Doolittle expressed her exasperation with Freddy Eynsford-Hill’s declaration of love: **“Don’t talk of stars burning above, / If you’re in love, / Show me! / Tell me no dreams filled with desire, / If you’re on fire, / Show me!”** In other words, actions speak louder than words. I am sure God feels the same when people go to church, pray earnestly, sing hymns lustily and listen intently to the sermon, then do nothing about it! I readily acknowledge that I was as bad as anyone, for I heard Christ’s call to become a local preacher ten years before I answered. I argued to myself that, even if I had the ability to fulfil my calling – which I doubted – I certainly had no time to devote to it.

Imagine my surprise after a Christmas Day service in 1993, when I had read the lesson. Instead of bidding me a happy Christmas, Deacon Jane Day poked me in the chest and declared, **“You’ve been called to preach, haven’t you?”** I reeled off my excuses, only to be told, **“If Jesus wants you, he’ll give you the time and gifts you need; so answer the call!”** She didn’t give me a chance to renege, because two days later the Superintendent Minister called at my house and two hours later I had a note to preach. I swiftly recognised the privilege of answering Christ’s call, which is why I did not hesitate when I saw the advertisement for a Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Wednesfield MHA, because I knew I was being called again. Apart from marrying Carol, it was probably the best decision I have ever made – and I thank God from the depths of my soul!

If you are experiencing a call to serve our Lord, in whatever capacity, answer it without procrastination, for our God who emptied himself out and died to redeem us will indeed use us – in the power of the Holy Spirit – when we serve him. Don’t be put off by doubts or false modesty, for as Deacon Jane told me, **“If Jesus wants you, he’ll give you the time and gifts you need; so answer the call!”** Coronavirus has changed the world. Many people, here and abroad are experiencing heart-breaking difficulties: loss of work; financial issues; broken relationships; anxiety and depression; isolation and a sense of powerlessness. We can’t put everything right on our own, but we need to explore ways where we can help – and then act as individuals or, better still as a church. We are saved by faith, but of what value is faith to us if we choose not to respond to the grace of our Saviour? So, let us turn our hearts to Jesus and play our part in his kingdom’s work. Amen.

We conclude our worship as we sing a hymn by Katie Barclay Wilkinson, a Nineteenth Century evangelist. I like this hymn so much it will be sung at my funeral – assuming that singing is allowed when I die! Hymn number 504, ‘May the mind of Christ my Saviour’.

1. May the mind of Christ my Saviour

**Live in me from day to day,
By his love and power controlling
All I do or say.**

2. May the word of God dwell richly

**In my heart from hour to hour,
So that all may see I triumph / Only through his power.**

**3. May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.**

**4. May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing –
This is victory.**

**5. May I run the race before me,
Strong and brave to face the foe,
Looking only unto Jesus
As I onward go.**

© *Kate Barclay Wilkinson (1859 – 1928)*

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.