

A service for 28th May, 2023 – Pentecost (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 25 vs. 4 & 5

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Melody Green in 1977 and popularized by her husband, contemporary Christian musician Keith Green. They were American – Jewish converts to Christianity and founded the Last Days Ministries in the USA in 1977. This hymn was included in the last album to be released before Keith's death in an aeroplane crash in 1982. The final verse was added by Keith. We shall sing hymn number 338, 'There is a Redeemer'

1. There is a Redeemer

**Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Holy One. Chorus**

*Thank You, O my Father,
For giving us Your Son,
And leaving us Your Spirit
Till the work on earth is done.*

2. Jesus, my Redeemer,

**Name above all names,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
O for sinners slain. Chorus**

*Thank You, O my Father,
For giving us Your Son
And leaving us Your Spirit
Till the work on earth is done.*

3. When I stand in glory,

**I will see His face,
And there I'll serve my King forever
In that holy place. Chorus**

*Thank You, O my Father,
For giving us Your Son
And leaving us Your Spirit
Till the work on earth is done.*

© Melody (B 1946) & Keith Green (1953 – 1982)

Let us pray

We come to you, O God, on this day of Pentecost, to offer our praise and adoration, for you, Lord, are all that is life. It was you whose Word brought creation into being and its wonders and beauty amaze us. You Lord are all that is life, for it was the Word who became flesh and lived among us in Jesus, full of grace and truth. You Lord are all that is life, for you breathed the Word and he came among us, giving life, enthusiasm, love and meaning. Therefore, we come to worship and adore you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, new

every moment, yet still the same. O loving heavenly Father, may your love burn within us, for you are our God and our times are in your hand.

You Lord are all that is life and you have blessed us throughout our life. Accept our thanks for the good things we enjoy, for people who have brought us love, light and guidance and also the opportunities and experiences that have fulfilled us, but above all things, thank you for loving us so much that you came as our Redeemer and friend.

Yet as we offer our praise and acknowledge your holiness, we are aware of our own failings. Forgive us, loving Creator, for our failure to delight in the variety and differences of people, for imagining that everyone should be the same and like us, thereby limiting your love which is given to all-comers. Forgive us, Lord of all, for failing to challenge those who mistreat others, for our lack of will in our search for justice, thus limiting your Spirit, who would bring unity to our society and our world. Forgive us, Creator God, for being afraid to take the first step, for not wanting to reach out to those in need or distress, so limiting your Son, Christ Jesus, who gave himself for all as our Lord of love.

The God who spoke and breathed and lives declares, 'Behold, I make all things new.' He forgives our sins and offers us a new beginning through his boundless grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.

We shall say the Lord's Prayer.

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 Presbyterian minister, Revd. Daniel Iverson, for a revivalist campaign in Florida during 1926. We remain seated as we sing hymn number 398, 'Spirit of the living God'. We shall sing it twice, please.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me,

Mould me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God,

Fall afresh on me.

© Daniel Iverson (b. 1890)

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

Heavenly Father, we offer our thanksgiving and praise for how you have blessed our lives in so many ways. Help us to share your grace by serving our neighbours as your earthly hands, by doing good as often as we can to as many people as we can for as long as we can. However, sometimes the situations we face are far beyond our powers, but nothing is beyond your wisdom and might. Therefore, when the best we can offer is inadequate, warm the hearts of people who possess such wisdom and power, so they may heal some of the brokenness in the world.

Lord, thank you for the peace and security we enjoy, for we know that so many countries are troubled and needy. We pray for aid to reach the victims of natural disasters promptly, especially those affected by recent flooding in Congo and Malawi, but particularly

everyone affected by the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. May aid be offered generously by governments around the world, not only to these lands, but to countries afflicted by droughts and famine. We ask a special blessing upon work being done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid to provide such victims with desperately-needed aid.

We remember people who are sick, lonely, bowed down by the pressures of life and bereavement, for all who live with a dementia, their families, friends and everybody who cares for their needs. In a time of silence, we bring our concerns for them to you, confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know their needs and reach out to them.

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Gracious Lord, where it is possible let us be part of the answer to our prayer, by being sensitive to their needs and offering them practical support. Enfold them in the warmth of your love that they be healed, comforted and receive hope, courage and a lasting peace.

Lord, we know so many countries caught up conflict, and so we pray for the peace of the world, particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and Jerusalem, asking that peace and justice be established and prevail. We pray for the leaders of the world's nations. May they govern justly and with mercy, for without justice and compassion there is no real peace. In your loving-kindness remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice. Lord, help them find justice and healing, so they can rebuild their lives in hope and security.

Heavenly Father, you provide us with a feast of love, so we may share its abundance with our neighbours. Therefore, we pray for this church, our Circuit and indeed the whole Church of Christ, that we learn to live in the unity of the one Spirit and take Good News to all peoples in words and deeds of love. Heavenly Father, help us work together in outreach and help us bear the gospel light to a world darkened by materialism, sin and want. Grant us the faith and steadfastness we need to answer our call to serve the risen Lord.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care, help us lead Christ-centred lives as we share your abundant love with friends and strangers alike, so we glorify the name of our risen Lord Jesus. **Amen.**

We shall sing a hymn by Margaret Old with lovely words set to the Skye Boat Song, following the practice of John Bell and Graham Maule of setting hymns to old ballads. Hymn number 394, 'Spirit of God, unseen as the wind'.

The New Testament reading is Acts chapter 2 verses 1 to 21

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked:

"Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to

Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?"

Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'" Amen.

Our penultimate hymn was written by a Nineteenth Century Bishop of Lincoln, Christopher Wordsworth, who happened to be a nephew of the great poet, William Wordsworth. It is based upon St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 – his hymn of praise for the qualities of agape – God's boundless love, which is ours to share through the Holy Spirit. We shall sing hymn number 379, 'Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost'.

**1. Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,
Taught by thee, we covet most,
Of thy gifts at Pentecost,
Holy, heavenly love.**

**2. Faith that mountains could remove,
Tongues of earth or heaven above,
Knowledge, all things, empty prove
Without heavenly love.**

**3. Prophecy will fade away,
Melting in the light of day;
Love will ever with us stay:
Therefore, give us love.**

**4. Love is kind, and suffers long,
Love is meek, and thinks no wrong,
Love than death itself more strong:
Therefore, give us love.**

**5. Faith, and hope, and love we see,
Joining hand in hand, agree;
But the greatest of the three,
And the best, is love.**

© Christopher Wordsworth {1807 – 1885}

Sermon: "Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" Acts 2:12

In Acts, Luke recorded how, around two thousand years ago, a hundred and twenty followers of Jesus were assembled at a house in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost. They were assembled in a bolted room because Jesus had recently ascended and they were afraid of the Jewish religious establishment. They would certainly have felt a deep sense of hopelessness and failure, for the disciples had been slow to understand Jesus' teachings, had deserted Christ in his hour of need, while Peter, who'd boasted he'd remain loyal even to death had denied even knowing Jesus three times. The eleven had rejected the women's news of the resurrection, only accepting it when Jesus appeared in person. Although Jesus' subsequent appearances had filled the hundred and twenty with joy, following his ascension they were not only afraid of Jewish Establishment, but felt inadequate to fulfil their commission, **'Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation'**. How could such, weak, ignorant failures do what Jesus had commanded?

John's gospel provided our answer, for, at the Last Supper Jesus promised his disciples, **'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth'**, adding, **'the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you'**. It is Worth noting that the **Holy Spirit** in Hebrew is **Ruach – the breath of God**. It is also noteworthy that Ruach is feminine, so whilst we traditionally call the Spirit **'him'**, strictly-speaking we ought to say **'her'**! Luke could only use similes to describe what happened that Pentecost, because the actual event was indescribable, but description of something like a violent wind filling the room can help us visualise God breathing power into everybody there. The tongues of fire represent the resulting enthusiasm and desire in the assembly, rather like the **'strange warming'** of John Wesley's heart at Aldersgate Street on 24th May, 1738. Indeed, the hearts of the hundred and twenty followers were warmed so much they seemed drunk with joy. Moreover, they received the gift of communicating with Jews from the Diaspora throughout the known world – ***truly a reversal of Babel!***

To the amazement of all who saw them, the apostles were as bold then as they'd been afraid less than an hour earlier. Jews from remote parts of Roman Empire asked, **"Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!"** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, **"What does this mean?"** Their reference to Galileans reflected a common prejudice against a province which had many Gentiles living there and so was considered an unworthy place to come from. Certainly, they believed no prophet could come from there, let alone the Messiah, for Galileans were deemed too ignorant and uncultured. Despite the crowd's prejudice, here was a group of Galileans who were able to speak their languages fluently. Nevertheless, some scoffed that they were drunk, to which Peter retorted that it only nine-thirty in the morning and then preached his first sermon – after which 3000 men, not counting women and children were baptised in the name of Christ Jesus.

Jesus told his followers, **'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.'** The word **'peace'**, a translation of the Greek **'eirene'**, is similar to **'Shalom'** in Hebrew. It means **blessing, fulfilment** as well as **inner peace**, borne out of trusting Jesus. Remember, this was the hour when the Church was born, **not sickly & feeble, but so dynamic it frightened the Roman Empire**, the superpower of its age, so much that

measures were taken to destroy all who proclaimed, “**Jesus is Lord**”! That’s not bad work for a hundred and twenty former backsliders, is it?

The Holy Spirit doesn’t just belong to ancient history: she’s evident in our world, too, if only we’re perceptive enough to recognise her. Here’s a story of how the Holy Spirit brought freedom and peace to Doris Brown, a woman as big in stature as in personality. Standing six and a half feet tall, with an enormous sense of humour, Doris became a missionary in China shortly before Mao Tse Tung and his Communists took control in 1949. The Chinese Communist Party wouldn’t allow anybody to deviate from their dogma, so Doris was arrested and, as party officials wanted to break her, she was subjected to brainwashing. She was questioned for hours until she became very disorientated and afraid. Suddenly, amidst her confusion, Doris recalled Jesus’ promise about the Holy Spirit. **‘When they arrest you, do not worry about what to say, or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say, for it will not you be speaking, but the Spirit of your Father, speaking through you.’** Doris prayed for help and was inspired to answer every question with a line from the Apostles’ Creed, starting once again after she’d finished every statement of faith. Let’s look the Creed and visualise Doris’ responses to her interrogators:

**I believe in God, The Father Almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth.**

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son. Our Lord.

**He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
and born of the Virgin Mary.**

**He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried.**

He descended to the dead.

On the third day he arose again.

**He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.**

He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

This time it was interrogators who cracked and, after trying unsuccessfully a while longer, they released Doris to return safely to England, undaunted by her experiences.

The Spirit lives within each of us. We’re heirs of the peace Jesus gave his disciples. The gift is free, so let us take it, find blessing, fulfilment and a peace that passes all understanding, for if we do, there’s nothing in the present or future that should trouble our hearts, for Christ is with us. If we let our hearts be warmed to serve Jesus in response to his sacrificial love for us, then the Spirit will lead us to a greater understanding of God’s word and she will empower us as we seek to answer Christ’s call in whatever way the Lord asks us to act. The Spirit-led Church is both **evolutionary and revolutionary** and must be both if it is to survive, so let us embrace change, whilst holding on to the essential truths. Let’s trust in the One who trusted his Father would raise him from death, as well as in the

empowering gift of the Holy Spirit. **Unbolt the doors of our fears and embrace the world beyond it with His redemptive love. Amen.**

“Breathe on me, Breath of God, / Till I am wholly thine, / Until this earthly part of me / Glows with thy fire divine.” Edwin Hatch’s words remind us of Cleopas and his friend and, of course, John Wesley, whose heart was ‘strangely warmed’ at Aldersgate Street on Pentecost, 1738. May the same Spirit warm our hearts, too. We shall close our worship as we sing hymn number 370, ‘Breathe on me, Breath of God;’

**1. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.**

**2. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Until my heart is pure.
Until with thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.**

**3. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
Till I am wholly thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glows with thy fire divine.**

**4. Breathe on me, Breath of God;
So shall I never die,
But live with thee the perfect life
Of thine eternity.**

© Edwin Hatch (1835 – 1889)

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 evermore. Amen.