

A service for 28th August, 2022 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 113 verses 1 to 3

Shout praises to the LORD! Everyone who serves him, come and praise his name. Let the name of the LORD be praised now and forever. From dawn until sunset the name of the LORD deserves to be praised. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1961, shortly after Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith read the translation of Mary's hymn of praise, the Magnificat, in "The New English Bible". We shall offer our praises to the Lord of social justice as we sing hymn number 186, 'Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!'

1. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord!

**Unnumbered blessings, give my spirit voice;
Tender to me the promise of his word;
In God my Saviour shall my heart rejoice.**

2. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his name!

**Make known his might, the deeds his arm has done;
His mercy sure, from age to age the same;
His holy name – the Lord, the Mighty One.**

3. Tell out, my soul, the greatness of his might!

**Powers and dominions lay their glory by;
Proud hearts and stubborn wills are put to flight,
The hungry fed, the humble lifted high.**

4. Tell out, my soul, the glories of his word!

**Firm is his promise, and his mercy sure.
Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord
To children's children and for evermore!**

© Timothy Dudley-Smith (1926 ---)

In our opening prayer, when I say, 'Amazing God', please respond with, 'We praise your holy Name'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you not only broke the power of death, but reconciled sinners like us to you.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you bought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and to atone for the sins of the world.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Holy Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into our discipleship.

'Amazing God' 'We praise your holy Name'.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. We ask you to hear and accept our praise and worship.

Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for everyone who guides, inspires and loves us, but most of all for your undying love, even we are loveless and faithless. Forgive us when

we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving or judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-kindle the embers of our faith, to a holy flame, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more without the burden of our sins. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you 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.

***'The kingdom of God is mercy and grace, / The prisoners are freed, the sinners find place, / The outcast are welcomed, God's banquet to share, / And hope is awakened in place of despair.'* Our next hymn was written in 1974 by Revd. Bryn Rees, a Congregationalist Minister. We shall sing 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}

We shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God.

Loving God, although the world in which we live is wonderful and self-sustaining, the news in our Media speaks of its brokenness and is often so gloomy it daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to rectify

the results of mankind's cruelty, folly, exploitation and indifference which result in so much suffering around the world.

God of shalom, we grieve about the number of conflicts around the world, especially at present, conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Guide the leaders of all nations to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, rather than resorting to war. Warm and mould their hearts so they seek justice and mercy in their dealings so that lasting peace can be built on solid foundations.

In your mercy Lord, may a negotiated peace be established soon between Russia and Ukraine: one that enables Ukraine to continue as an independent democracy. Grant President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, the steadfast courage, wisdom and resources to resist Russia's might and frustrate the Kremlin's plans. Most of all, merciful God, hear our prayer for civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces. Enfold them in your care that they may be comforted and protected. Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees. Grant then a warm welcome from host nations and generous hospitality to ease their distress.

Lord our provider, we pray for organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen. May the relaxing of the blockade of Ukraine's ports allow the export of much-needed grain and oil to these countries.

We remember, too, people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which help the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government, business leaders, charities and local councils find ways of helping all who are finding it difficult to manage.

God of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear. Heavenly Father, in a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.

..... Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love which offers comfort, healing, courage and peace that passes all understanding.

Holy Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities, as we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission and may the Spirit of truth and love help us bear the gospel light to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, so our lives bring you honour through Christ Jesus our Lord and friend. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is Proverbs chapter 25 verses 6 to 7

Don't try to seem important in the court of a ruler. It's better for the ruler to give you a high position than for you to be embarrassed in front of royal officials. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 14 verses 1 to 14

One Sabbath, Jesus was having dinner in the home of an important Pharisee, and everyone was carefully watching Jesus. All of a sudden a man with swollen legs stood up in front of him. Jesus turned and asked the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law of Moses,

“Is it right to heal on the Sabbath?” But they did not say a word. Jesus took hold of the man. Then he healed him and sent him away.

Afterwards, Jesus asked the people,

“If your son or ox falls into a well, wouldn’t you pull him out right away, even on the Sabbath?” There was nothing they could say.

Jesus saw how the guests had tried to take the best seats. So he told them:

“When you are invited to a wedding feast, don’t sit in the best place. Someone more important may have been invited. Then the one who invited you will come and say, “Give your place to this other guest!” You will be embarrassed and will have to sit in the worst place.

When you are invited to be a guest, go and sit in the worst place. Then the one who invited you may come and say, “My friend, take a better seat!” You will then be honoured in front of all the other guests. If you put yourself above others, you will be put down. But if you humble yourself, you will be honoured.

Then Jesus said to the man who had invited him:

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, don’t invite your friends and family and relatives and rich neighbours. If you do, they will invite you in return, and you will be paid back. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They cannot pay you back. But God will bless you and reward you when his people rise from death.” 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 to narrow / By false limits of our own; / And we magnify his strictness / With a zeal he will not own.” Frederick William Faber was an Anglican priest who followed John Henry Newman into the Church of Rome. Frederick Faber demonstrated his grasp of theology with the wonderful words for our next hymn. Number 683, ‘There’s a wideness in God’s mercy,’ 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}

Sermon: *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Luke 14:11

A former minister at Wordsley Methodist Church, Revd. Tony Stones, once related how one of his services was disrupted when he was serving in Nottingham. Several dignitaries were present, but the Mayor had not arrived when the service was due to begin, so Tony announced the first hymn and, after it had been sung, began the prayers of adoration and thanksgiving. It was at this point that the door at the rear of the chapel was pushed open with a bang and a small, plump man wearing a large, ornate chain around his neck bustled into the church. He waddled down the aisle, looking for something, ignoring several spaces in the pews and tutting loudly as he came towards the pulpit. The congregation was thoroughly distracted by then, so Tony stopped the prayer to look at the intruder. Wholly unabashed by the commotion he was causing, the small man called out to Tony,

“Where do I sit, vicar?”

Diplomatic as ever, Tony did not give him the answer he deserved, but said he could sit anywhere that was unoccupied, but that wasn't good enough for the man.

“Look, my good man,” he demanded, **“Where is my seat. I'm a very important person – I'm the Mayor. I ought to have a special place – a place of honour!”** Tony thought swiftly, and seeing that, in the best Methodist tradition, the front two rows were vacant, replied soothingly,

“I'm sorry, Mr. Mayor. I didn't recognise you. Please sit on the front row, just in front of me.”

“I should think so, too!” spluttered the Mayor, as he sat down, oblivious to the giggles of regulars, who realised what Tony was doing.

Most of us will confess to a degree of pleasure when we see overbearing characters put down a peg or two: many comedy programmes use it as their source of humour; **Captain Mainwaring** in **“Dad's Army”**; **Mrs Bucket** in **“Keeping up Appearances”** and especially **Basil Fawlty** in **“Fawlty Towers”**. Even in real life, some people take delight when the famous, rich or powerful are exposed by the tabloid press – what Germans call **schadenfreude** - malicious joy when pomposity is pricked. Such feelings are not new, as our gospel reading illustrated.

The episode took place in the house of a leading Pharisee, who had invited Jesus and his disciples to a Sabbath meal, not as much an act of open hospitality, but to probe for faults that would lead to Christ being discredited, or even condemned – the passage says, **‘he was being carefully watched’**. At this point in Luke's gospel, the Sanhedrin, the religious Establishment of the Jews, was in a state of undeclared war against Jesus, whose teaching was seriously at odds with their interpretation of Torah, the Law of Moses. The Pharisees were convinced that Christ was a dangerous radical,

so they were determined to bring him down before he undermined their traditions and practices.

In the light of such opposition, Christ was fearless, for upon seeing a man suffering from **oedema**, painful swelling caused by an excess of fluid, he was moved to heal him. Last week's lectionary showed Jesus also on a sabbath at a synagogue, healing a lady bent double by **spondylitis** for eighteen years, much to the annoyance of the synagogue ruler, so the man with dropsy was not a guest, but had probably been directed to come by Pharisees keen to see whether or not the Lord would break their interpretation of Torah. No one was willing to answer Christ's enquiry whether or not it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath, so he healed the man and sent him on his way, before rounding on would-be critics, telling them that if they would rescue a drowning child or animal on a Sabbath, then there is all the more reason to save a sick human being from suffering. Two things ought to be noted at this point: the man who had been healed of dropsy was sent home, because the Pharisees would have considered his condition as God's judgement for his sins – he would have been thought of as ceremonially unclean – unfit for both God's kingdom and their banquet. Secondly, by laying hands on the man, Jesus would also have been considered ceremonially unclean by law, yet he was tolerated as a guest.

Christ turned his attention to other guests, who were scrambling for places near their host, for places closest to the head of the table were positions of honour. He told a parable of how humiliated they would be if they took a place of honour at a wedding feast, only to be told to give it up for somebody more distinguished. It would be far better, he said, to take the lowest place, so that they would be exalted when the host called them to sit nearer him. Jesus made the inversion of human values in his Father's kingdom when he told the guests, **“Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** He went on to advocate to the host that, if he invited the poor, marginalised and outcast to his feasts in future, he would be offering hospitality for the Lord's sake, rather than for his own advantage, for his relatives and wealthy guests would repay him in kind, whereas the poor could not. By looking to the needs of the poor and lowly, we lay up treasures in heaven, become rich toward God, though perhaps at the cost of our personal prestige.

This reading is a challenge for us all to consider our attitude to other groups of people, especially to those on the margins of society. Do we fall into the trap of thinking we are better than we really are? Are we free from prejudice as individuals? Do we have rules that exclude others – think how the Established Church is divided over women bishops and gay bishops – Methodism is struggling with the issue of gay marriage, so let us first consider our own attitudes. If anybody came here with a major drugs or drink problem, or who was an illegal immigrant, a sex-worker, or fresh from prison, I'd love to think that we could welcome them with warm hearts and open arms, but if we're honest, it would not be easy. However, if we don't open our hearts and minds to people on the fringes of society, how can we restore them to what Christ would have them be?

Christ Jesus displayed his Father's commitment to the hopeless and helpless, the loveless and unloved of society by dying for our sins and being raised to establish a new covenant, based upon faith and love, rather than on intricate laws. He calls us to treat others as our equals, to reach out to our neighbours in loving-kindness. Christ calls us to be just or even-handed in our dealings, to stand up for the rights of victims of injustice or prejudice. Think: had Trevor Huddleston not ignored Apartheid conventions, stepped off a pavement in Johannesburg and raised his hat to a black

woman and her son; had he not visited the same boy when he was seriously ill in hospital, would that young man have found Jesus, become a priest, then the archbishop who helped bring a peaceful end to Apartheid and usher in the Rainbow State? That boy was Archbishop Desmond Tutu. **Sometimes even a simple, inclusive, generous act can have profound consequences for good. May even our small kindnesses be building-blocks in Christ's kingdom. Amen.**

We shall close our worship with a clarion call to evangelize by Canon Edward Burns. It was written in 1968 as part of a challenge to write evangelical hymns in the diocese of Blackburn. It was published a year later and is a challenge for each of us. We shall sing hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim'.

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

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Benediction

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.