

A service for Lent 2 – 28th February, 2021 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 61 verses 1 to 3

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. Amen

Our first hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and, like many of their hymns, it is set to an old Gaelic melody from the Isle of Lewis. We shall sing the first three verses of hymn number 28, 'Jesus calls us here to meet him'.

1. Jesus calls us here to meet him

**As, through word and song and prayer,
We affirm God's promised presence
Where his people live and care.
Praise the God who keeps his promise;
Praise the Son who calls us friends;
Praise the Spirit who, among us,
To our hopes and fears attends.**

2. Jesus calls us to confess him

**Word of life and Lord of all,
Sharer of our flesh and frailness,
Saving all who fail or fall.
Tell his holy human story;
Tell his tales that all may hear;
Tell the world that Christ in glory
Came to earth to meet us here.**

3. Jesus calls us to each other,

**Vastly different though we are;
Creed and colour, class and gender
Neither limit nor debar.**

**Join the hand of friend and stranger;
Join the hands of age and youth;
Join the faithful and the doubter
In their common search for truth.**

© John L. Bell (b. 1949) & Graham Maule (B. 1958)

Let us pray.

Creator God, who else is there like you, for you spoke and brought light and life throughout the universe. You provide our daily needs in your compassion and you have sought to draw us close to you, despite our sinfulness. Indeed, when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, instead of abandoning us as we deserved, you took our human form as Jesus Christ, who not only taught us how we should live, but broke the hold of sin and death through his crucifixion and resurrection and has empowered us with the Holy Spirit within us. We come to offer our worship and adoration today.

Thank you for all the blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for fulfilling opportunities and experiences; for challenges that both test us and mould

our characters, but most of all thank for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Merciful Lord, forgive us for our failure to love and serve you wholeheartedly, for not loving other people as we love ourselves, for the sins we have committed and the good we've neglected to do. Help us to amend our ways and to live as Christ Jesus calls us to.

Amazing God, you hear and answer our prayer, offering forgiveness and inviting us to follow you once more. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, to serve our neighbours joyfully and faithfully in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

We shall say the prayer our Lord taught his disciples:

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 one of my favourite hymns, which was written by a Congregational/ URC minister, Revd. Bryn Rees in 1974. The main setting, "Tetherdown" was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, Muswell Hill, London, where he was organist and Revd. Rees was Minister – so I suppose you'd call it a home-grown hymn. Hymn 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}

In our prayers of intercession, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond, 'heal our brokenness'. Let us pray.

Amazing God, although we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live and in your sustaining grace, we grieve at the suffering of our neighbours both nearby and further afield, more often than not as a result of mankind's failure to live as you call us to. We acknowledge that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part, however small it is, to heal some of the world's brokenness. Whilst many situations are far beyond our power to remedy, we know they are not beyond yours.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for peace in countries which are suffering from war, persecution and terrorism. We pray that the leaders of the world will learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force to gain their ends. May those who govern countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, turn and seek mercy and justice in all their dealings. As we think of victims of mankind's inhumanity to man, we pray that they may receive the support and courage they need to build new, better and secure futures.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Loving God, help us answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches and organizations that serve the poor and vulnerable in our society. Remember the churches in our area and the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic and help us serve and support the poor and broken-hearted, here and abroad. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Loving Lord, encourage the Government and their advisors to adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic whether or not they are popular or politically expedient. We continue to ask for a special blessing upon the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they strive to heal us and keep us safe throughout this crisis. Help them cope with the enormous demands that are being put upon them and protect them in their work.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, remember people who are suffering from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your presence in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are living with a dementia, besides their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them in difficult times.

Remember in your compassion everybody who is facing furlough, unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time when we are already burdened with uncertainty. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer them friendship and practical support. In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help..... Loving Lord, enfold them all with the warmth of your love, so they experience the fullness of your comfort, hope and transcending peace.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Like Christ, the past year has been a wilderness in which we have been sorely tested. Fill us with the food we need to follow our Saviour: wisdom, courage, steadfastness and compassion, so we may feed our neighbours with the living bread of the gospels and your saving grace.

'Merciful Lord'.....'heal our brokenness'.

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Keep us free from harm, help us to resist temptation to sin, so that the way we live brings you honour and glory, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Alan T. Dale, author of "New World: The Heart of the New Testament in Plain English", a translation I recommend to you. Mind you, I groan inwardly when I have to sing it, for it is set below my range and I growl much of it. (I usually turn off the microphone before I sing this tune!) Hymn number 404, 'God's spirit is in my heart'.

**1. God's Spirit is in my heart,
He has called me and set me apart.**

This is what I have to do,

What I have to do. *Chorus:*

He sent me to give the Good News to the poor,

Tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,

Tell blind people that they can see,

And set the downtrodden free

And go tell everyone

The news that the Kingdom of God has come,

And go tell everyone

The news that the Kingdom of God has come.

2. Just as the Father sent me,

So I'm sending you out to be

My witnesses throughout the world –

The whole of the world. *Chorus:*

3. Don't carry a load in your pack;

You don't need two shirts on your back;

God's workers can earn their own keep –

Can earn their own keep. *Chorus:*

4. Don't worry what you have to say,

Don't worry, because on that day

God's Spirit will speak in your heart,

Will speak in your heart. *Chorus:*

© Alan T. Dale (1902 – 1979) vs. 2 – 4 Hubert Richards (Born 1921)

Our Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 61 verses 8 to 11

"For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed."

I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the soil makes the young plant come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. Amen.

The Gospel reading is Luke chapter 4 verses 16 to 19

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Gerald Coates, founder of Pioneer, a charismatic group of evangelical churches and the hymn-writer, Noel Richards in 1992. Hymn number 404, 'Great is the darkness that covers the earth'.

1. Great is the darkness that covers the earth

Oppression, injustice and pain.

Nations are slipping in hopeless despair,

Though many have come in your name.

Watching while sanity dies,

Touched by the madness and lies. *Chorus:*

Come Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus

Pour out your spirit we pray

Come Lord Jesus, come, Lord Jesus

Pour out your spirit on us today.

May now your Church rise with power and love,

This glorious gospel proclaim.

In every nation salvation will come

To those who believe in your name.

Help us bring light to this world

That we might speed your return. *Chorus:*

Great celebrations on that final day

When out of the heavens you come.

Darkness will vanish, all sorrow will end,

And rulers will bow at your throne.

Our great commission complete,

Then face to face we shall meet. *Chorus:*

© Gerald Coates (born 1944) & Noel Richards (born 1955)

Sermon: Jesus serving with gladness – Luke 4: 16 – 19.

Politicians often adopt slogans and mission statements at the beginning of election campaigns. Some, like ex-President Trump used, 'Make America great again', whilst others promise the electorate a New Jerusalem, alas without consulting Revelation chapter 21, but surely there has never been as wonderful mission statement as that made by Jesus when he read the scroll of the opening of Isaiah in the synagogue at his home village of Nazareth, for unlike most political leaders, Christ fulfilled it. When the third Isaiah wrote chapter 61, the Judeans were in exile in Babylon, oppressed and broken-hearted, for Jerusalem and Solomon's temple were in ruins and hope was in short supply. The prophet declared that God would remember them and restore them – to show them his favour.

Jesus used these verses to show the nature of his ministry to all peoples. He said that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him, conflating the image of a newly-crowned king being anointed with oil with his Spirit-borne authority from the Lord. However, Jesus' ministry was not of somebody who was served, but of One who came to serve. Christ was given God's authority to bring Good News not just to Jews, but to the whole world, especially to the poor, marginalised and lost. He added that he had come to **proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.** By that, Jesus didn't simply mean he would abolish prisons, cure physical blindness and end oppression: he was going to free people from the captivity by sinfulness, to reveal God's truth to the

spiritually blind and to help people oppressed by physical, spiritual and mental burdens, besides declaring Jubilee when debts were set aside, in this case our debt of guilt owed to God. This was not a manifesto of a quick-fix politician, but of One appointed by God to change and heal the world.

The gospels certainly relate how Jesus healed the blind, handicapped and mentally ill; how he offered forgiveness directly, or by restoring people to their communities, for example the woman at Jacob's Well with a dodgy marital history and Zacchaeus, the tax-collector, but the greatest act of forgiveness was when he was nailed to the cross and prayed, 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing'. Nevertheless, it was his concern for the poor, sick, outcast, foreigner and marginalised that marked his ministry and it must mark the ministry of the Church, too, if we are to be authentic followers of Christ.

This passage challenges us to consider what we are doing towards bringing good news to our community, let alone to the world. Does our church have a mission statement? If so, that's good, but is the church putting what it proclaims into practice? If so, that is very good, but is its ministry what our community actually means, or is there anything else the church should be doing as well as, or instead of what is going on? Ironically, the lockdown gives us time to review our ministries, to determine what Christ is calling us to do. If we discover that what we've been doing isn't what Jesus wants, don't despair, but look to how our outreach can change and adapt.

Let us consider how coronavirus has changed our mind-set as well as our mission. I think many of us will have been profoundly affected by the events of the past year: not only the dreadful loss of life, but the severe restrictions we have faced. We may feel disempowered, pessimistic, unable to do anything to address any of the issues society faces. Don't despair, for we are not working alone, but are Spirit-led.

It is certain that many people in our community will have suffered financially over the past year and may have lost their jobs. Can we support charities that help them: Citizen's Advice or job clubs, either financially, or by making space for them in church during the week? Other people may well have housing issues, bereavement, or relationship breakdowns to contend with. Can we help, or support them? Certainly, many, many people will have endured crippling loneliness during the past year? How can we help? However, we must not forget those who are suffering long-COVID. Perhaps, we can see if we can do anything to support them by approaching the local health authority. Last, but by no means least, is the psychological effects of COVID19, not just on the general population but on health and care workers, many of whom have been deeply traumatised. There is going to be a long-lasting need for counsellors and mental health practitioners to help deal with depression, anxiety and PTSD. If we can do nothing else, what about supporting charities like MIND?

Before anybody begins to panic, I am not suggesting that every church attempts to meet every need I've mentioned, but as a Circuit we may be able to work together to address the needs of at least a few of them. And not just as a Circuit. Jesus did not institute denominations within the Church, so we ought to be big enough to be willing to work with others, if by so doing we fulfil part of Christ's work and answer our calling.

Above all else, let us remember that service was a delight to Jesus, not drudgery. Let us take pleasure in serving others and learn to laugh again, so we don't fall into the trap of those earnest, but vinegar-faced Christians described once on "Thought for the Day" by the Baptist Pastor, Revd. Roy Jenkins as he recalled the chapel he attended as a youth in the Welsh Valleys. Don't let coronavirus destroy our sense of humour as well as everything else! Consider the story of the blind man leading other blind people and

falling in a ditch. Christ's listeners would have roared with laughter when he told it. When Jesus washed his disciples' feet at the Last Supper, he showed us by example what we ought to be doing, so let each of serve the Servant King with joyful, thankful hearts. Amen.

We close our worship with hymn number 398 which was written by Revd. Brian Wren for the 1969 Pentecost service at his Congregational church at Hockley, Essex. 'There's a spirit in the air'.

- 1. There's a spirit in the air,
Telling Christians everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.**
- 2. Lose your shyness, find your tongue;
Tell the world what God has done:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!**
- 3. When believers break the bread,
When a hungry child is fed,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.**
- 4. Still his Spirit leads the fight,
Seeing wrong and setting right:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!**
- 5. When a stranger's not alone,
Where the homeless find a home,
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.**
- 6. May his Spirit fill our praise,
Guide our thoughts and change our ways:
God in Christ has come to stay;
Live tomorrow's life today!**
- 7. There's a Spirit in the air,
Calling people everywhere:
Praise the love that Christ revealed,
Living, working, in our world.**

© Brian A. Wren {born 1936}

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.