

A service for 28th July, 2024 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 145 verses 13 to 16

The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made. The LORD upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing. Amen.

Our first hymn was written in 1993 by Bernadette Farrell, one of the best contemporary hymn-writers. She is from Yorkshire and was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK. We shall sing hymn number 706, 'Longing for light, we wait in darkness,'

**1. Longing for light, we wait in darkness,
Longing for truth, we turn to you.**

Make us your own, your holy people,

Light for the world to see. *Chorus:*

Christ, be our Light!

Shine in our hearts,

Shine through the darkness.

Christ be our Light!

Shine in your Church gathered today.

2. Longing for peace, our world is troubled.

Longing for hope, many despair.

Your word alone has power to save us.

Make us your living voice. *Chorus:*

3. Longing for food, many are hungry.

Longing for water, many still thirst.

Make us your bread, broken for others,

Shared until all are fed. *Chorus:*

4. Longing for shelter, many are homeless.

Longing for warmth, many are cold.

Make us your building, sheltering others,

Walls made of living stone. *Chorus:*

5. Many the gifts, many the people,

Many the hearts that yearn to belong.

Let us be servants to one another,

Making your kingdom come. *Chorus:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray

Eternal God, Source and maintainer of all life throughout the universe, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and always, so we come into your presence to offer our best in worship and adoration. We recognize your awesome wisdom and creative might as we consider the beauty and complexity of our world and the countless stars, planets and moons in the universe. We are astonished that you should have time for such flawed and feeble beings like us, let alone honouring us by seeking to draw us close to you in a relationship when we may call you "Abba", 'Daddy'.

Although you sought to make us your earthly children through the Patriarchs and prophets, we insisted on going our own way, rebelling against you and turning away from you. However, instead of punishing us as we deserved, you took on our mortal form

and lived amongst us as Christ Jesus. He not only came to show us how we ought to live, but die on a cross at Calvary to atone for the sins of the whole world. By dying, Jesus broke the hold of Satan and, when he was, he ensured death does not have the final word by offering us everlasting life. That is truly amazing grace, O Lord! Take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may place you at the heart of our worship. Amen.

We come now to our prayers of thanksgiving and confession. When I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we offer our heartfelt thanks for this lovely, self-sustaining planet upon which we live. Thank you for all the good things we enjoy; for opportunities and experiences that have delighted and fulfilled us; for people who guide, love and inspire us, but most of all for your undying love which we can see in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Jesus. Thank you for loving us even at our worst when we are cold-hearted and hateful.

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

Merciful Lord, forgive us when we are unfaithful, self-righteous and judgmental in our dealings with our neighbours; when we are not as generous with our possessions and our time as we ought to be and when our love for you and our neighbours is limited by our self-interest. We acknowledge that we are slow to answer your call and take a chance for your kingdom's sake. Help us to change our ways, forgive us and restore us to righteousness.

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

Merciful Lord, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and have not only pardoned us, but are calling us to follow you without the burden of our sins. Lord God, fill us with your Spirit, teach us to serve our neighbours cheerfully and faithfully, so we may honour you in the beautiful name of Jesus. 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.

We continue our worship with a hymn translated in 1940 from an Urdu lyric. The translator was Dermott Monahan, son of a Wesleyan Methodist missionary, who, like his father, served in Southern India, most of his life, though he was educated in England and was trained at Handsworth College, Birmingham. The melody is a Pakistani folk song. Hymn number 252, 'Jesus the Lord said: "I am the Bread,"'

1. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.

The Bread of Life for the world am I,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.'

Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I'.

2. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Vine –

The true and fruitful Vine am I.'

3. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Way,

The true and living Way am I.'

4. Jesus the Lord said, 'I am the Light,

The one true Light of the world am I.'

5. Jesus the Lord said: 'I am the Life,

The Resurrection and the Life am I.' © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57) *Singing the Faith version*

In our prayers of intercession we remember people near and far away.

Creator God, we acknowledge the wonders and beauty of the world, but we are also aware of how broken it is, often by human greed, spite, pride, foolishness and indifference. In Jesus' name we ask you to guide and empower us as we seek to serve our neighbours, but we recognize that we can't make as many changes we would like to see on our own. Nevertheless, help us serve conscientiously, but when the best we can do is not enough, then reach out and inspire people who have greater power and influence to act as well.

We pray for our church, the churches in our Circuit, in neighbouring circuits and, indeed, the World Church. Teach us to speak of the love and beauty of Christ Jesus with one voice and to serve him in unity of mission. May the Holy Spirit help us employ our faith, love, gifts and graces to proclaim Jesus as the Saviour of the world and may our words and deeds of love bravely carry the gospel light to this strife-ridden and broken world.

The State opening of Parliament took place eleven days ago, so we pray for all Members of Parliament, whatever their political views. Fit them with a desire to serve the country unselfishly and honourably, so that some of the disreputable and self-seeking behaviour of the previous session does not repeat itself. May they treat one another with respect, so members of the public are not moved to threaten or attack our representatives. And we pray that the violence that took place a fortnight ago in the USA will not be repeated, so the Presidential Election is not jeopardised.

Jesus declared, peacemakers to be children of God, so at a time when they are desperately-needed, we ask you to bless everyone who is working for peace: for negotiators, aid-workers and medics, particularly those who are serving on the front line. May they enjoy success in their endeavours and remain safe. We pray for a just and swift end to fighting in Ukraine, in Gaza and Somalia and for gang warfare in Haiti to cease, so the people can enjoy the fruits of peace. Lord, may the tensions between Iran and Israel, especially with Hezbollah in Lebanon, not escalate into open warfare that may have global consequences. Inspire national leaders to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, instead of resorting to force. Teach them to govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of lasting peace. And Lord, remember in your mercy, all victims of warfare, terrorism, discrimination and oppression, that they may receive the courage and support they need to rebuild their lives and find healing in body, mind and spirit.

Lord of creation, the breakdown of the ecosystem upon which we and all living beings depend is evident in the extreme weather that is affecting every continent, as highlighted by the super-hurricane Beryl which has caused serious damage and loss of life in the Caribbean, Mexico and the southern states of America. For the sake of life on this planet and for future generations, help us to live in a more sustainable way by being less wasteful, reducing pollution and using only the resources we need.

We remember people we know who are ill in body, mind or spirit; those who are lonely, afraid, or in any kind of need or trouble and, in particular, everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear and is finding bereavement unbearable. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.
Lord, while we ask you to help us provide them with both practical support and

friendship, enfold them in the warmth of your love, so they may be comforted, find healing, courage, hope and enduring peace.

Abba, eternal Source of love, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us free from harm and inspire us to share the abundance of the love you bestow upon us with both friends and strangers, so our lives glorify you in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

The Gospel reading is John chapter 6 verses 1 to 21

Some time after this, Jesus crossed to the far shore of the Sea of Galilee (that is, the Sea of Tiberias), and a great crowd of people followed him because they saw the miraculous signs he had performed on the sick. Then Jesus went up on a mountainside and sat down with his disciples. The Jewish Passover Feast was near.

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and the men sat down, about five thousand of them.

Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. When they had all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.

After the people saw the miraculous sign that Jesus did, they began to say, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world."

Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself. When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough. When they had rowed three or three and a half-miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading. Amen.

Our penultimate hymn was written by Revd. Bryn Rees in 1974. He was the Minister at Tetherdown URC, Muswell Hill, London at the time and one of four melodies for the hymn is called "Tetherdown", though many churches prefer to sing it to "Hanover"! Whatever melody is chosen, we shall sing 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}

Sermon: “Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?” John 6:5

John’s gospel is like a multi-faceted gem, for many stories reflect more than one truth, so it is a book I recommend you to explore in detail, not just at a basic level. For example, it would be easy to simply write-off Jesus feeding the five thousand and walking on water as two miracles without looking at the significance of each. I’m sure that all of us have faced challenges that have made us exclaim despairingly, “That’s impossible!” A family situation, a crisis at work or in the church may have left us feeling wholly inadequate. However, what at face value seems impossible can happen: Messrs. Frederik de Klerk, Nelson Mandela and not least of all, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, steered South Africa from Apartheid to the Rainbow State, when many had expected the country to be torn apart by a terrible race war; or the powerful advocacy of Gordon Wilson that led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement and relative peace in Northern Ireland, even though Gordon had been a victim of the Enniskillen bombing of 1987 in which his daughter, Marie had perished. Who would have thought that Alan Bates, who in his own words was ‘one of the little skint people’, could expose the wickedness of the Post Office in the Horizon software scandal, or that Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness would have been nicknamed “The Chuckle Brothers” at Stormont following decades of enmity? God can choose the most unexpected people to heal some of the world’s brokenness, for to him nothing is impossible.

Nevertheless, I can well imagine Philip’s feelings when Jesus asked him, “**Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?**” After all, a great crowd had followed Jesus and his disciples from the western shore of the Sea of Galilee to Bethsaida, near where the River Jordan flows into the sea. Although Jesus and his friends had sought rest, the Lord was filled with compassion when the multitude appeared, seeking healing and teaching. There were more than five thousand people, for John recorded that there were five thousand men, they were in a remote place and, as the Passover Feast was imminent, it is likely that Bethsaida would not have had enough bread, even if the disciples had sufficient money to pay for it. Taking Jesus’ question at face value, Philip replied that it would have cost two hundred denarii, nearly eight months’ wages for a working man, and even that amount would barely provide a small helping for the multitude. I suspect Andrew felt sheepish as he brought a boy to Jesus, saying that he had (presumably) offered to share his five barley loaves and two fish, but wondering how that could help.

Jesus already knew what he was going to do, so he told his doubting followers to bid the crowd sit, then he took the boy’s small offering, blessed it and had the disciples distribute it. Not only was the crowd’s hunger satisfied, but twelve baskets of leftovers was clear evidence of the abundance of God’s provision for the helpless, hopeless Galileans. The most significant thing about this miracle is not so much the size of the crowd, nor the twelve baskets full of leftovers, but the way in which it mirrors God’s gift of manna for the Israelites in the wilderness and how Jesus exceeded the great prophet

Elisha's feeding of one hundred men with only twenty loaves. John is telling us that Jesus has the same power as God the Father and far more than the great prophets. In other words, Jesus is God in man, not just a prophet and healer. A second point is how God will use what little we have to offer, in material or spiritual matters and expand it to fulfil his purposes. It is also significant inasmuch that it shows the compassion of God – through Jesus – for ordinary people. In Jesus God is seen as the Good Shepherd, who tends his flock – don't be misled into thinking that it means only the Church: God's care is for all his creation.

Moreover, don't waste time speculating about how Jesus walked on water. If we can explain it, then it isn't a miracle. Its significance is that Christ demonstrated power over the elements, power reserved for God alone. Therefore, John provides his readers with another sign that Jesus is God in man, not just a prophet and healer. Don't forget arguments were raging amongst John's contemporaries about the nature and being of Christ – disputes that only ended with the Nicene Creed in the Fourth Century, so John was making his position clear for all.

Sadly, the Galileans were more concerned to declare Jesus King, as a source of easy food, rather than seeking the spiritual bread that satisfies the soul. While attending to material needs is important, if we neglect the spiritual side, well-being can quickly change to ill-being. By spiritual, I don't just mean religious: our spirituality is what makes us come alive, what makes us who we are. We can gain spiritual food when we go on holiday, or hear a piece of music that moves us, or read a poem that uplifts us, or do something we enjoy, or share the company of somebody we like. It can be a sunrise, or sunset, a striking panorama, even a wonderful meal. Most of all, our well-being is enhanced by knowing that we are valued and loved for who we are, warts and all. God loves us precisely in that way!

I hope that you have come to church today for spiritual food for our journey, for as a Church, we need spiritual refreshment, if we are going try to address a broken world. Now is the time to think of how we as a body of believers can address some of the issues that face society: reaching out to our communities to ease loneliness, supporting groups who are helping people suffering with depression and anxiety, working with groups who reach out to people in debt, or the unemployed, or running holiday clubs to support struggling families. And these issues are just scratching the surface of need around us.

Are you now feeling like the disciples at Bethsaida? If so, don't despair. We cannot do everything on our own and Jesus doesn't expect us to. However, we can address one or perhaps two issues, using the expertise and help of charities, or offering them a base at church. We can work as a group of churches, or as a Circuit, or, heaven help us, sharing the task with other denominations. Let us copy the boy by offering all we have and are – however inadequate we fear them to be – and let the Lord bless and use it. Our Church is built upon the foundations of God's amazing and unfathomable love, a love that took Jesus to Calvary, then raised him from the grave, finally coming to all who turn to Christ in faith as the Holy Spirit. Let us trust the redemptive love that founded the Church and use it to bring healing and hope in Jesus' name. Amen.

Although our closing hymn is frequently heard at Welsh football matches, rugby games or at choir recitals, I suspect few English people may know the importance of the hymn's author to the great revival of faith in Wales during the Eighteenth Century. Indeed, William Williams is considered to have played as important a part in the spiritual awakening of Wales as the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield

did in England. Like Charles Wesley, William Williams wrote many hymns, eight hundred in all, but his were mainly in Welsh, for he was determined to speak to his flock in its own tongue. There is a traditional story behind his becoming a hymn-writer in which the fiery itinerant preacher Howell Harris challenged the members of the Methodist Association to write hymns for the next meeting, 'To see whether or not the Lord has given the gift of poetry to one of us'. Our hymn was written in 1745, translated into English by Peter Williams – no relative, for Williamses are plentiful in Wales and published in 1812. I have given you time to brace yourselves, so let us sing hymn number 465, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah' with hwyl!

**1. Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.**

**2. Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield.**

**3. When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.**

© William Williams (1717 – 1791) trans. by P. Williams (1722 – 1796)

Benediction

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