

A service for 29th January, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 19 verses 7 to 10

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1998 by Brian Doerksen, a Canadian singer-songwriter, when he was only thirty-three years old. He was something of a prodigy – his earliest hymns were published when he was in his mid-twenties. Hymn number 24, ‘Come, now is the time to worship’.

Come, now is the time to worship.

Come, now is the time to give your heart.

Come, just as you are to worship.

Come, just as you are before your God, come.

One day every tongue

Will confess you are God,

One day every knee will bow.

Still, the greatest treasure remains

For those who gladly choose You now.

Come, now is the time to worship

© Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, Giver of life throughout the universe, your compassion sustains us, you bless humankind with your redemptive love, a love we see revealed in the life, death and resurrection of your dear Son, Christ Jesus. We are grateful that he has broken the power of sin and death, reconciling sinful human beings to you, our heavenly Father and offers us everlasting life through his grace, not by anything we deserve, or can do to earn it.

Therefore, as we come to offer you our praise, adoration and thanksgiving today, take away all distraction and anxieties, so we can celebrate your holiness, goodness and glory. Amen.

We come to the Lord again, as we offer our prayer of thanksgiving and confession.

When I say, ‘Lord, in your mercy,’ please respond with ‘Hear our prayer’.

Loving Lord, accept our wholehearted thanksgiving for this beautiful, self-sustaining planet that you made for us, for all the good things that we enjoy: for opportunities to serve you and our neighbours and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all we thank you for boundless love us even at our worst, when we know we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess our failure to live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly and sometimes disregard your call to care for others in Jesus’ name, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience. In a time of reflection we bring to mind occasions when we have failed to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, of being self-centred, rather than Christ-centred.

Lord, in your mercy **Hear our prayer.**

Lord of righteousness, help us turn away from wrongdoing and back to you.

Warm and soften our hearts and guide us with your truth. Bring us into the light of your love as we seek your forgiveness, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death, allowing us to play our part in building your kingdom here.

Lord, in your mercy..... **Hear our prayer.**

Gracious heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, and that you have not only pardoned us but call us to follow Christ Jesus as his disciples, without the burden of guilt. May the power of the Holy Spirit guide and perfect our service, so our lives become a beacon to draw others to know, love and serve our risen Saviour. 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 is on our sheets and is based upon our reading from Micah. We sing, 'What praise and off'ring does the Lord desire?'

1. What praise and off'ring does the Lord desire?

What work, or tribute, does our God require?

We have an answer in a prophet's word:

'Love mercy, justice, humbly walk with God.'

2. You great and powerful, don't neglect the weak;

Address their problems; their well-being seek.

You mighty, heed a minor prophet's word:

'Love mercy, justice, humbly walk with God.'

3. Leaders of commerce, care for those in need:

Grow rich in goodness; don't submit to greed

And all may prosper through the prophet's word:

'Love mercy, justice, humbly walk with God.'

4. All called to service, let your work reflect

Christ's care, compassion, patience and respect:

Then you'll fulfil the prophet Micah's word:

'Love mercy, justice, humbly walk with God'

M. Rider – 16th Jan., 2023 (to "Anima Christi (Maher)" StF 629 or "St. Agnes" StF 235) Based on Micah 6: 6 – 8

In our prayers of intercession, we bring our concerns to the Lord. Let us pray.

Gracious, heavenly Father, Christ Jesus came as the True Light in the sin-darkened, broken world, for which we pray now. In recognition of your boundless grace to us, we offer ourselves to play what part we can to build your kingdom here as we reach out to neighbours who are in distress or need. However, we know how limited our powers are, so we turn to you, to whom nothing is impossible. Warm and mould the hearts and minds of people who wield power and influence to encourage them to bring about much-needed change.

Lord, guide leaders of the wealthy nations to be generous to the people of countries where there is great poverty and suffering, in particular lands afflicted by famine and natural

disasters. We ask a blessing on charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as inflation increases to record levels and the cost of food and fuel spirals out of control. We thank you for food banks, warm spaces and for other initiatives which are helping the poor, but pray that new ways may be found to help people who are facing the awful choice between heating their homes, or of eating during the winter.

Heavenly Father, we ask your blessing on the National Health Service at this time of crisis: for patients and the doctors and nurses who are caring for them. May your healing hand rest upon them and fill them with your peace.

Jesus came to heal and comfort the marginalised and sick whom he met, so we pray for the healing of everybody we know who is sick in body, mind or spirit. Grant them wellbeing, hope and peace not only through the professional care and support they are given, but by feeling your presence during their time of need.

We remember people who have been bereaved, or those who are lonely, or who feel undervalued, or who are homeless and unemployed. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of people around us, so we can befriend and support them. In a period of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help at this time Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so it may bring them healing, comfort, hope and peace.

God of shalom, on this Sunday nearest Holocaust Memorial Day we pray for the victims of war, terrorism, prejudice and oppression. We recall the horrors of Nazi concentration camps where six million Jews and many Gypsies, handicapped people and opponents of Nazism were murdered. We grieve that, far from learning from history, there have been more acts of genocide since, including Rwanda, Bosnia and Cambodia. Help us to be instruments of your peace by how we treat all people, including those we find it hard even to like and give us the courage to speak out against injustice and persecution. Lord speak to the hearts and minds of national leaders, so they turn away from using violence as a means of gaining their own way. Instead, may they govern with mercy and justice which are the foundations of true peace. We also pray for an end to the war in Ukraine and the heartbreaking suffering of the civil population. Bring an end to their anguish and help them rebuild their lives in peace and security. Warm our hearts with your love, so peace begins with us.

Saviour, we pray for this church and churches in our Circuit, that we may be a light of hope to a sin-darkened world. We pray, too, for the World Church, that old differences may be set aside and all Christians learn to serve you in unity of mission to build your kingdom in spirit, love and truth.

Abba, Father, bless us and our families as we seek to answer our call to serve you. May the joy of knowing how dearly you love us inspire us to let the light of your love shine through our actions and words, as we share your blessings with everyone we meet and honour you through Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Friend. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is Micah chapter 6 verses 1 to 8

Listen to what the LORD says:

“Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. Hear, O mountains, the LORD’S accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel.

My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam. My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counselled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 5 verses 1 to 12

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Amen.

We continue our worship as we sing a hymn by Revd. John Keble, whose Assize Sermon in 1833, led to the movement of a number of Anglican priests, including John Henry Newman, to the Roman Catholic priesthood, though Revd. Keble himself remained a loyal member of the Church of England. We shall sing hymn number 244, ‘Blest are the pure in heart’.

1. Blest are the pure in heart,

For they shall see our God:

The secret of the Lord is theirs;

Their soul is Christ’s abode.

2. The Lord who left the heavens

Our life and peace to bring,

To dwell on earth in lowliness,

Our pattern and our King.

3. Still to the lowly soul

He doth himself impart,

And for his dwelling and his throne

Chooseth the pure in heart.

4. Lord, we thy presence seek;

May ours this blessing be;

Give us a pure and lowly heart,

Sermon: “Beatitudes” Mtt 5:1 – 12

The Sermon on the Mount began with what are called ‘The Beatitudes’, because of the use of “Blessed” at the beginning of each of the qualities to which Jesus refers. Unfortunately, ‘Blessed’ is a poor translation of the Greek ‘Makarios’, which is better rendered as ‘happy’, or better still, ‘fortunate’. The Good News Bible uses ‘happy’, not in the sense of being cheerful, or content, but to be congratulated. So, what qualities does Christ advocate and declare those who possess them to be fortunate? If you look at them by current society’s standards, they may seem absurd, because there is no mention of celebrity, fame, wealth, power over others, nor pre-eminence in public gatherings. Instead, Jesus tells us what kingdom values really are.

Jesus copied the style of Old Testament poetical books to outline the qualities of true discipleship. Let us examine what Jesus regards as kingdom qualities: the **‘spiritually poor’** means people who humbly trust God, even though their loyalty can lead to their material disadvantage and possibly oppression. Unlike the worldly, they do not use their talents for their own benefit, to gain wealth or power, which the world reveres, but instead they offer their gifts for the benefit of others. Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven consists of such men and women.

‘Those who mourn’ are not so much the bereaved, or penitent: they are people who are saddened by the state of the world, by their own failings and inability to set things right, so who turn to the Lord in their distress. Jesus says they will find inner peace through God’s salvation. **‘The meek’ or ‘humble’** are those who are gentle in their dealings, who set their own wishes aside to meet the needs of other people. As a result, they may not prosper in worldly terms, but they will receive God’s favour. **‘Those whose greatest desire is to do what God asks of them’** means all who answer his call, whether or not it is convenient, or if it sets them at odds with their worldly ambition. **Jesus says they will find satisfaction by doing the Lord’s will.**

‘Those who are merciful to others’ means more than being willing to forgive, although forgiveness is a prerequisite for God’s forgiveness. The Hebrew word for **‘mercy’** is **‘chesed’** – better translated as ‘loving-kindness’, so what Christ meant was the more love we give away, the more we shall receive from God. **‘The pure in heart’** are not people who put on a pretence of piety to gain the admiration of other people, but those whose lives are pleasing to God, by how they repent their sins and serve him wholeheartedly.

Peacemakers are honoured as God’s children, for whilst **‘peace’** certainly means resolving conflicts, the Hebrew **‘shalom’** provides a broader definition: true, they try to end conflicts, but they also work for the well-being of others, who seek both the material and spiritual prosperity of all, who set aside self-interest to benefit their neighbours. Conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine, have shown that real peace cannot be established by force, but depends upon reconciliation, upon winning the hearts and minds of the people with whom we have clashed: **you don’t just have to win a war; you need to win the peace that follows, too.**

‘Those who are persecuted because they do what God requires’ are people who suffer in material terms, or who are scorned by the worldly for living as God directs them, for not compromising their conscience in order to gain favour, wealth, power. They are willing to stand up and be counted when they see injustice, or evil at work, even though they may suffer for doing so. Whistle-blowers may fall into this category.

Jesus ended by warning those who follow him that they might face persecution and character assassination as a result, but called them not only to be strong but even be glad in their suffering, for prophets had often been persecuted and rejected and Christ, too, would be put to suffering and be killed for being true to God. It was especially pertinent to contemporaries of Matthew at the beginning of Rome's attempt to obliterate Christianity.

It is difficult for us to possess most of these kingdom qualities, yet we see in the gospels that Christ fulfilled them all: he became poor for our sakes, trusted his Father would raise him from the dead. He was obedient even to death on a cross. Christ mourned that Jerusalem's religious establishment obstinately refused to accept his good news, yet he did not give up on them. Jesus did not seek out the rich, powerful and self-satisfied, but instead reached out to the poor, sinful, diseased and foreigners. Jesus' dealings with the fallen, marginalised, aliens, even the enemies of the Jews, offered healing and reconciliation to all-comers which marked him as the greatest of peacemakers. I shall finish with an account of a nun who lived out both the Beatitudes and our holy habits of generosity and gladness.

Elizabeth Pilenko was born to a rich family in Nineteenth Century Russia. However, she sympathised with the peasants, thousands of whom died of starvation every year, even though the Tsar was the richest ruler on earth. She supported the Russian Revolution, but when the Soviet system proved to be as corrupt and cruel as Tsarist times, she emigrated to Paris in 1923, joining a sisterhood of nuns who worked in the poorest districts of the capital. She visited the sick and elderly, prepared meals, besides doing household chores her patients could not, always with a cheerfulness and purpose that endeared her to everybody she met.

She was given the title, 'Mother Maria' when she founded a hospice in Paris. In May 1940, the German army occupied France. At once, the Gestapo and SS set about rounding up Jews, sending those they captured to concentration camps. Mother Maria sheltered Jews in her hospital before they were taken to safety by the Resistance. Inevitably, she was betrayed, arrested and sent to Ravensbruck, where a mass – extermination plan had been put into effect. In the camp, Maria continued to care for the sick and dying, even sharing the little food she had with others. Soon, she became a living skeleton, yet she remained so cheerful that even the guards called her, 'that wonderful Russian nun'.

On Holy Saturday, 31st March 1945, Maria saw a group of Jewish women outside the gas-chamber, which they had been told was a shower room. However, a young girl, realising its true purpose, began to scream in terror. Before the guards could club the child to death, Mother Maria, ran forward, took her hand and uttered, "Don't be frightened, I'll come with you." Praying quietly, the pair shuffled forward to their deaths. Maria lived out the Beatitudes and was a blessing to many people. May we be so. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Jacqueline Jones, a contemporary Christian singer-songwriter, originally from South Africa, who was based in the United Kingdom for 5 years, but now lives in Christchurch, New Zealand and is enjoying the role of vicar's wife – at least I hope she is! We shall sing hymn number 662, 'Have you heard God's voice: has your heart been stirred?'

1. Have you heard God's voice; has your heart been stirred?

Are you still prepared to follow?

Have you made a choice to remain and serve,

Though the way be rough and narrow? *Chorus:*
Will you walk the path that will cost you much
And embrace the pain and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you
The disciples of tomorrow?

2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
When the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground
When the crowds are turning violent? *Chorus:*

3. In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?
Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
Will you share your faith with the faithless? *Chorus:*

4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
And believe it could be different?
Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint? *Chorus:*

We will walk the path that will cost us much
And embrace the pain and sorrow.
We will trust in One who entrusts to us
The disciples of tomorrow.

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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 forevermore. Amen.