

A service for 2nd August, 2020 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 105 verses 1 to 4

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Amen.

Let us, like the Psalmist, come gladly to worship the Lord our God as we sing a hymn written by Revd. Carl Boberg in Sweden during the summer of 1885 and which came to us via Germany Russia, Ukraine, where it was translated and adapted by Stuart Keene Hine, sent to New Zealand, forwarded to Billy Graham in the USA and became popular in the UK during the 1960s. We shall sing hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

**1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed: *Chorus*
*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!***

**2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: *Chorus***

**3. And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin. *Chorus***

**4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration**

And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! *Chorus* © C. Boberg / Stuart K. Hine

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we have come to worship and adore you today, for you are mighty, faithful, holy and wise. You are the Creator of our universe and all life within it, yet from the earliest times, you revealed yourself to human beings and gave us your holy word so we might know, love and serve you. Even when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you showed your boundless love and grace through your Son, Jesus Christ, who not only brought Good News in words and deeds, but gave his life at Calvary to redeem us from our sins. You raised him, so that by his triumph over death we have the offer of eternal life. Then, when he ascended to heaven, you sent your Holy Spirit to inspire, comfort and guide us through our life.

Amazing God, take away all our anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit, love and truth.

Thank you, O Lord, for all the good things with which you have blessed us, for people who have brought light, joy, love and guidance into our lives and for opportunities and experiences that have brought us happiness and fulfilment.

On this Summer's day, we thank you for this beautiful world and your enduring love, for we confess that whilst you are loving and true, our lives often fall short of you want us to be. We know that our words, thoughts and deeds sometimes hurt and upset other people and fill you with grief. We don't always serve you wholeheartedly and we certainly don't always care for other people as we would like them to care for us. Help us to change our ways, to become more loving and faithful day by day and, in Jesus' lovely name pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed to do.

Merciful heavenly Father, we believe that you hear and answer our prayers and, confident that you have forgiven us, we ask that from now on, the Holy Spirit will rule our lives, so we use his gifts for the good of the Church and our neighbours, in Jesus' holy 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.

Our next hymn was written by William Williams, who 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. He was known as 'The Sweet Singer of Pantycelyn'. This hymn was translated by Peter Williams who was not related to William. Hymn number 465, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,'

**1. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
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)*

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.

Creator God, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to help our neighbours, both local and far afield. Grant us the spiritual resources we need to answer our call, but, where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to motivate and empower other people who can really make a difference to the world.

Gracious God, we pray for the governments of the nations of the world, that they may work for justice and peace, to learn to negotiate and resolve disagreements without resorting to violence and oppression and to strive to end poverty which cripple lives of so many people, here and abroad. We pray for victims of warfare, terrorism and persecution, that they receive practical support, hospitality and encouragement and may find hope for the future. May we, too, live out what we have just asked for in our dealings with our neighbours.

Lord of life, we ask your blessing on the NHS and key-workers who have been steadfastly supporting the sick and vulnerable throughout this coronavirus crisis, often at the cost of their own health and safety. We ask that you will keep them safe in their work and that an effective way of controlling this pandemic will be discovered soon.

We continue to pray for victims of COVID 19, here and abroad and ask you to guide our national leaders to adopt policies that will protect us until this pandemic is brought under control. Help us to play our part in defeating COVID19 by patiently observing guidelines laid down by the Government, difficult though they may be, and reassure us that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can all face the future, with hope grounded in your saving grace.

Lord of wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only through the professional care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them; grant them a sense of being loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, we remember neighbours who are lonely, afraid, broken-hearted, overworked, unemployed, or who face the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for all who are facing a broken relationship, as well as any who mourn the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer

names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will know their needs and will reach out to them.
Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which there is healing, courage, strength and peace.

Lord, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide: unite us, so everybody may believe that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world. Help us begin to plan for the ending of lockdown, as we face many serious issues that have arisen during the past five months. Unite us in love and action, so we can continue to bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and often hostile world.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm, help us to lead Christ-centred lives and to share your abundant gift of love with all-comers, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our next hymn is set to an Urdu folk melody and was translated by Dermott Monahan, Principal of Andhra Union Theological College in Hyderabad. He trained at the Methodist College in Handsworth, so we have a local connection. We shall sing 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.'** *Anonymous © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57)*

The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 55 verses 1 to 5

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of the peoples. Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.” Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 14 verses 13 to 21

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said,

“This is a remote place, and it’s already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.”

Jesus replied,

“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,” they answered.

“Bring them here to me,” he said.

And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. Amen.

“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.” We sing Bryn Rees’ vision of the kingdom of God. 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: *Feeding the 5000* – Matthew 14: 13 – 21

When I attended Handsworth Grammar School, the Head of Divinity, as RE was known, delighted in trying to find natural explanations for miracles, not as much to debunk them, but as a mental exercise. When we studied the feeding of the five thousand in Luke's gospel, Mr. Jowett told my class that it was obvious that when Jesus blessed and broke the five loaves and two fish, those who had brought food with them – but had intended to keep it to themselves – were shamed into sharing it with their neighbours: the miracle lay in the changing of hardened hearts. Another theory from one of my commentaries is that each person only had a fragment of food, rather like in Holy Communion, but in which case how could twelve baskets of waste be collected? I believe the miracle must have been exactly as the gospel writers said, for all four recorded this incident and if it were as easily dismissed as my Divinity teacher claimed, it would not have survived two thousand years' scrutiny.

Let us review the events described by Matthew: having heard of the killing of John the Baptist, Jesus sought solitude, almost certainly in the hills near the town Bethsaida which was on the north-eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, near where the River Jordan empties into the lake. He probably wanted time to reflect upon events, but, as this Bethsaida was in the Province of Gaulonitis, it was under the jurisdiction of the Tetrarch Philip, who loathed Herod Antipas, the killer of John the Baptist, so Jesus and his followers were relatively safe there. However, people heard that he was sailing across the Sea of Galilee, so they walked around the coast, outpacing the boat in which our Lord travelled. Upon seeing the large crowd, Jesus set aside his own desire for solitude and both taught and healed them until late in the day.

At that point, the disciples suggested he dismiss the crowd, so they could go into town and buy food before nightfall, whereupon Jesus told them, **“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”** Their despairing response, **“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,”** showed that they recognised that the immensity of their task was beyond their powers – either in accessing such a quantity of food, or paying for it. All they had to offer their Lord was a child's meal – not even enough to satisfy a man, let alone a crowd of more than five thousand!

Matthew recorded that Jesus bade the crowd sit on the grass, took the food, gave thanks to God, broke and blessed it, then bade his disciples distribute it. All four gospel writers declared the disciples filled twelve small wicker baskets with leftovers, not only to show everybody had eaten enough, but to show the generous providence of God through Christ. Don't be distracted by the symbolism of the twelve baskets of left-overs. This is the key point: the disciples gave the little they had; Jesus blessed it and it fulfilled the needs of the people. Any attempt at a rational explanation is pointless, for if it were only a parable, or a symbolic story, the gospel writers would not have given it such prominence. Indeed, this is one of the signs pointing to Jesus' divinity, for it harkens back to the manna God provided during the exodus and to Elisha feeding a hundred men with only twenty loaves. In this account, Jesus is shown to be even greater than Moses or Elisha, for he fed five thousand men and unnumbered women and children – a foretaste of the Messianic banquet referred to in our eucharist liturgy.

There is another, important, aspect to this story. The disciples discovered their physical and spiritual resources were inadequate to fulfil their Master's wishes – hence their hopeless response when he told them to feed the multitude themselves. Yet, by offering all they had brought to the Lord, he increased it and they themselves were able to complete their task. It was not just that occasion when Christ's followers realised their own limitations. Despite the resurrection appearances – and a meal by the Sea of Galilee in John's gospel – the hundred and twenty who had locked themselves away in

a room in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension were afraid, generally helpless and hopeless and lacking the ability to answer the risen Lord's Great Commission to take the Good News to the corners of the world,. They could not act in their own strength, yet when the Holy Spirit filled them, they received his gifts and poured out into the street, praising God and amazing passers-by with their ebullience, so much so that some Jews thought they were drunk. Moreover, following Peter's first sermon, three thousand were baptised in Jesus' name – the hundred and twenty was multiplied at least twenty-five times – more if Luke had included only men and not women and children! Just like the five loaves and two fish, God made much of the few who started the Church.

Currently, the Coronavirus Emergency Appeal by both All We Can and the Disasters Emergency Committee exposes the plight of over 6 million internally displaced people in Syria, after nearly 10 years of civil war, many of whom are living in overcrowded camps. For the past decade Syria has been one of the most fragile places in the world, and it is now one of the most vulnerable to the coronavirus pandemic. The UN has called for an immediate country-wide ceasefire to allow an unrestricted response to the outbreak. But years of conflict have decimated the health care systems. There are only 57 public hospitals fully functioning, with considerable shortages of trained staff and equipment. This is all before the pandemic struck. DEC charities are reporting urgent concerns about the risks of the virus spreading, as vulnerable people are unable to take the basic measures to protect themselves.

When we consider the sheer numbers of people who need help, it would be so easy to throw up our hands in despair and say we are too few in number – or too busy – or too old (perish the thought) to meet the needs of our community, let alone the needs of our broken world. Like the disciples Jesus instructed them to feed the multitude, we may feel that all we have to offer is the equivalent of the boy's meal, yet we are part of the body of Christ. Remember, before churches and football stadiums were closed down, more people used to go to church every Sunday than attended football matches. Therefore, consider this: if all Christians in the UK were to offer an average of only £1 to All We Can or the Disasters Emergency Committee, that contribution would make a surprising difference. Moreover, we could encourage family members and friends to donate, too, for these charities ensure that the monies raised goes directly to help the victims and is not siphoned off by corrupt officials. Like the boy with the loaves and fish, what we offer can and will be used by the Lord to save the helpless.

Perhaps some of us may feel we have little to offer Christ, not only in material terms, but in talents and service. I wonder how many of us have failed to answer our Saviour's call to serve because of our sense of inadequacy, or because we fear failure? My friends, if Jesus has called, or is calling you to serve him within this church, or in the community, respond, even if you feel inadequate. Fifteen years ago, I felt a strong call to apply to become a Chaplaincy Co-ordinator at Wednesfield MHA and my life has been blessed with a job I love! Mind you, twenty-six years ago I answered a call to preach and it is a moot point whether or not Methodism has been blessed – think of all those cremated dinners! Seriously, if the Lord wants you to serve him in any capacity, he will provide the resources, both material and physical, that will allow you to answer his call. Let us be the loaves and fishes that satisfy the needs of many and thereby glorify Christ our Saviour. Amen.

We conclude our worship with hymn number 804, 'The Church of Christ, in every age'.

1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.
2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.
3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.
4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.
5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.

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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 for evermore. Amen.