

A service for 2nd October, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 37 verses 1 to 4

Don't be upset because of evil people. Don't be jealous of those who do wrong, because like the grass, they will soon dry up. Like green plants, they will soon die away.

Trust the LORD and do good. Live in the land and feed on truth. Enjoy serving the LORD, and he will give you what you want. Amen.

'Morning by morning new mercies I see; / All I have needed thy hand hath provided. / Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.' Our opening hymn was written by Thomas Obediah Chisholm in 1923, but did not become popular until it was republished in "The Baptist Hymnbook" in 1962, since when it has appeared in most hymnals. We shall sing hymn number 51, 'Great is thy faithfulness,'

**1. Great is thy faithfulness, O God, my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with thee;
Thou changest not; thy compassions, they fail not;
As thou hast been thou forever shall be: Chorus:**

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!

Morning by morning new mercies I see.

All I have needed thy hand has provided.

Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.

**2. Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
Sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,
Join with all nature in manifold witness,
To thy great faithfulness, mercy and love. Chorus:**

**3. Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide;
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside! Chorus:**

© Thomas O. Chisholm (1866 – 1960)

Let us pray.

Sovereign God, you created everything that lives throughout the universe, you formed the sun, moon and this beautiful planet, yet despite your boundless power, you care for sinful human beings so much that from our first days you have tried to draw us close to you. When human beings rebelled against you and made themselves your enemies, you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your gracious nature and your boundless love. Through his life, death and resurrection our sins are forgiven and we have the gift of everlasting life. Help us, therefore, to pray to you in faith, to sing our hymns joyfully and to both receive and respond to your holy word. Amen.

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

Heavenly Father, thank you for your boundless, enduring love that has not only set us on a beautiful, self-sustaining planet, but offers us blessings day-by-day. Thank you for opportunities and experiences that fulfil us, for challenges that shape our character and for people who have blessed us by their example and loving-care. Most of all, thank you for loving us at times when we are faithless, loveless and unlovable.

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

Merciful Lord, we ask you to pardon and restore us as we recall times when we have not loved you wholeheartedly, when we have ignored your call to serve you, for our failure to care for our neighbours as we know we ought, especially when they are in distress, or need help. Forgive us, too, when we try to justify our sinfulness, rather than do what we know we should. Help us to change our ways, to become less self-centred and more Christ-centred.

'Lord, in your mercy', please reply, 'Hear our prayer'.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us, but you call us to follow you once more, unburdened by guilt. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to love and serve both you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully in the blessed name of Christ Jesus our Lord and Friend. 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 jointly written by Noel Richards and Gerald Coates, who founded Pioneer, a network of churches and groups whose aim is to "develop new churches across the UK and engage in mission globally. Noel Richards was inspired to write hymns and worship songs after he attended a concert at the Colston Hall in Bristol at which twenty-one-year old Graham Kendrick performed. We shall sing hymn number 405, '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.***

***2. 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:***

***3. 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 (b. 1944) & Noel Richards (b. 1955)

We shall now bring our concerns to the Lord in our prayers of intercession.

Heavenly Father, despite the beauty of this wonderful, lovely and self-sustaining world with which you have blessed us, we are not blinded to the great suffering which goes on around us, much of which is the result of human greed, pride, foolishness and indifference. Lord, where we are able, use us as your earthly hands. Grant us compassion, courage, steadfastness and wisdom when we serve others in Jesus' name, but where the best we can do is inadequate, reach out in mercy to inspire people with wisdom, power and influence to bring about change, for everything is possible for you.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for an end to the enmity and strife which mar so many countries around the world, especially at present, conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Bring peace and reconciliation to these countries and warm the hearts of national leaders, leaders of opposition parties and pressure groups so they work for peace, rather than their own selfish interests. Breathe your Spirit of truth and love upon this troubled world, O Lord, and hear our prayer for the victims of both warfare and terrorism and also for refugees, that they may receive comfort and support in both their distress and need.

Generous God, 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 countries Afghanistan and especially those in the horn of Africa. May the relaxing of the blockade of Ukraine's ports continue to allow the export of much-needed grain and oil to these countries. We offer our prayer for victims of severe flooding in Pakistan, asking that the nation receives much needed help as soon as possible.

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 and other agencies 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, including all who live with a dementia and people who struggle to care for them and all who are in any kind of need or trouble. Hear our prayer for neighbours who living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. In a period of silence, we bring the names of people who need your help at present:
Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but enfold them in the warmth of your love which offers comfort, healing, hope, courage and a peace that passes all understanding.

Immanuel, God with us and amongst us, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Renew and invigorate us in our calling as we seek new ways to serve our communities, at this time of emergence 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 so we bear the gospel light to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, Bless us, our families and friends. Inspire us to keep Christ at the centre of our lives, so we reveal the light of your love in all we do and say, in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Old Testament reading is Habakkuk chapter 1 verses 1 to 4 and chapter 2 verses 1 to 4

This is the message that the LORD revealed to the prophet Habakkuk. O LORD, how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from violence? Why do you make me see such trouble? How can you endure to look on such wrongdoing?

Destruction and violence are all round me, and there is fighting and quarrelling everywhere. The law is weak and useless, and justice is never done. Evil people get the better of the righteous, and so justice is perverted. I will climb my watchtower and wait to see what the LORD will tell me to say and what answer he will give to my complaint.

The LORD gave me this answer:

“Write down clearly on clay tablets what I reveal to you, so that it can be read at a glance. Put it in writing, because it is not yet time for it to come true. But the time is coming quickly, and what I show you will come true. It may seem slow in coming, but wait for it; it will certainly take place, and it will not be delayed. And this is the message: ‘Those who are evil will not survive, but those who are righteous will live because they are faithful to God.’” Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Luke chapter 17 verses 5 to 10

The apostles said to the Lord,

“Make our faith greater.”

The Lord answered,

“If you had faith as big as a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Pull yourself up by the roots and plant yourself in the sea!’ and it would obey you.

Suppose one of you has a servant who is ploughing or looking after the sheep. When he comes in from the field, do you tell him to hurry and eat his meal? Of course not! Instead, you say to him, ‘Get my supper ready, then put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may have your meal.’ The servant does not deserve thanks for obeying orders, does he? It is the same with you; when you have done all you have been told to do, say, ‘We are ordinary servants; we have only done our duty.’” Amen.

We continue with a hymn written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care.

He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. Hymn number 629, ‘God of my faith, I offer you my doubt’.

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,
For life at times seems far too dark for me,
And my belief becomes more insecure,
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

**2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,
When I am scared by my anxiety,
When all I hear is suffering and woe,
In all my shadows you will walk with me.**

**3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,
When I sink down in sadness or despair,
When in depression I cannot be touched,
I pray in all my depths to find you there.**

4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,
In aching age or in rejected youth,
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.

5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,
Light in my life and all my life in you.

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

Sermon: "O Lord, how long must I call for help before you listen?" Habakkuk 1:1

Habakkuk is described as a minor prophet, yet in many ways his is a unique book, because it is a direct questions and answers session with God himself. Little is known about the prophet himself, except his ministry was between 626BC and 587BC, when Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army destroyed Jerusalem and led the Jews into exile. Habakkuk certainly prophesied in Jerusalem when the Babylonian Empire was expanding through Palestine, taking control of the Assyrian Empire, which, 120 years before had conquered the Israelite Northern Kingdom of Samaria. While Habakkuk saw the Babylonians as God's instrument of punishment for the Assyrians' oppression of Israel, he posed God some hard questions: how could the Lord use such impure instruments as Babylonians to avenge the cruelty shown to the Israelites? Why do the wicked often seem to prosper – against the scriptural wisdom of the age? Why does God stand by silently in the face of national evil and injustice? Aren't these questions many people still ask, even more than twenty-six centuries later?

The book began, '**How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save? Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. Therefore, the law is paralysed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted.**' These evils are rife nowadays. I am sure that Habakkuk's sentiments are shared by the friends and relatives of the children abused and killed by parents or their partners in the past year, by Syrians suffering under the brutal regime of President Assad, of Ukrainians who are suffering unbearably as a result of the Russian invasion, or of victims of gang warfare in our own towns and cities, including nine year-old Olivia Pratt-Korbelt who was killed in her own home in Liverpool last month. When outrages like these occur, rather than acknowledging human failings sinfulness, it is natural for many to demand, **where is God? Why didn't he intervene?**

When Habakkuk asked the Lord, "**Why don't you deliver the people from injustice?**" God replied, "**Be patient. I have things under control and evil people will be punished.**" When Habakkuk demanded, "**Why do you wait silently while the wicked destroy the innocent?**" he was told, "**Justice will come. Live faithfully and you will have your reward.**"

Immediately before today's gospel reading, Jesus taught that if somebody apologizes for sinning against us, even if it happened seven times in one day, we must forgive him or her. Jewish law dictated that there was a limit to forgiveness, but Jesus declared that there is no limit to mercy for repentant sinners. When they heard his message, the apostles asked Jesus for enough faith to be able to do what he asked them, but Jesus replied that they did not need extra faith, but the right kind of faith, faith based on humility. We must never fall into the Pharisaic trap of feeling superior to others. The hymn, 'Forgive our sins as we forgive', reminds us thus: '**In blazing light**

your cross reveals / The truth we dimly knew, / How small the debts men owe to us, / How great our debt to you!’

The fact is that God is in control, even though so often the world seems a chaotic place. He is not remote, as this reading, “The Long Silence”, reminds us:

‘At the end of time, billions of people were scattered on a vast plain before God’s throne. Some groups talked angrily.

“How can God judge us? What does He know about suffering?” snapped a young woman, who jerked back a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. A black man lowered his collar, showing a rope burn. “What about me?” he demanded. “I was lynched for no crime, but being black. My forefathers suffocated in slave ships, were torn from loved ones and saw death as a blessed release from slavery.”

Many others voiced complaints against God for the evil and suffering that He allowed in the world. They spoke bitterly that God was lucky that He lived in heaven where all was peace and light. Surely, they said, God was remote from weeping, fear, hunger and hatred. They agreed that He led a sheltered life.

Therefore, each group sent out a representative. There was a Jew, a black woman, a Palestinian child, an untouchable from India, an illegitimate child, a victim from Hiroshima, a sweatshop worker and a political prisoner. They met in the centre of the plain and declared that, before God should judge them, He must endure what they had suffered. They resolved that God should be sentenced to live on earth – as a human being. However, because he was God, they demanded certain safeguards to be sure he could not use his divine powers to help himself. These were their conditions: ‘let him be born a Jew; let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted, so that none will know who is really his father; let him champion a cause so just, yet so radical, that it brings down the hatred and condemnation of the Establishment upon him; let him try to communicate God to human beings... things beyond normal experience; let him be betrayed by his dearest friends; let him be indicted on false charges, convicted by a prejudiced jury and condemned by a cowardly judge; Let him be terribly alone and abandoned; let him be cruelly tortured and die an agonising, humiliating death alongside common criminals.’

As each leader announced a part of the sentence against God, there were approving cheers, but when the final part was declared, there was an eerie silence. All movement stopped. All anger drained away, for everyone there knew with awful certainty **God had already served the sentence!’**

{From ‘The Long Silence’ author unknown – taken from “Know Your Faith” by John Young}.

How can we be puffed up or complacent when we think of the price paid for our redemption? How can we accuse God of indifference when he sent his only Son to die like the basest of criminals, in profound agony and under a Deuteronomic curse, to restore us and the whole of humankind to righteousness? Equally, how can we give in to hopelessness and despair, evil though the times may be, for be assured, the God who died so we might have life in all its fullness won’t abandon us.

Though we are called to stand up against evil, we must not allow ourselves to become embittered by it, for Christ Jesus offered hope to the criminal crucified alongside him and even forgave those who put him to suffering and death. Therefore, let’s remain steadfast in living out the gospel message as well as proclaiming it. Let’s hate the sin but love the sinner, which is the model shown in the life of Christ Jesus. Remember this part of the **Methodist Catechism: ‘All need to be saved; all may be**

saved; all may know themselves saved; all may be saved to the uttermost'. Lord God, help us hold these truths close to our heart when evil things happen, so we continue to trust in Christ and to try to change people's lives by our faithful witness. Amen.

“My talents, gifts and graces, Lord, / Into thy blessed hands receive...” We conclude our act of worship as we sing Charles Wesley's, ‘Give me the faith which can remove / And sink the mountain to a plain;’ Hymn number 661.

1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o'erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.

2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.

3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners' friend.

4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

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.