

**A service for 30<sup>th</sup> January, 2022. (StF)**

**Call to Worship: Psalm 71 verses 14 to 16**

But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure. I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone. Amen.

*Our opening hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community and is set to a Gaelic melody, like many of their hymns. We sing 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.**

**4. Jesus calls us to his table**

**Rooted firm in time and space,  
Where the Church in earth and heaven  
Finds a common meeting-place.**

**Share the bread and wine, his body;**

**Share the love of which we sing;**

**Share the feast for saints and sinners / Hosted by our Lord and King.**

*© John L. Bell (born 1949) & Graham Maule (born 1958)*

***Let us pray***

Heavenly Father, we worship you, the Creator of all life in our universe, our God, who loves sinful human beings so much you shared our human form when you came as, Jesus, to reveal your true nature and to save us. Jesus came into the world in lowly

Bethlehem and grew up in Galilee among ordinary people to share our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our trials and temptations, as Immanuel, God with us. Through his crucifixion and resurrection our Lord Jesus triumphed over sin and death, for our sakes, offering us a new covenant of love and faith with you.

Lord, we come to thank you for the many blessings we receive from you: all the good things we enjoy; the opportunities and experiences that have brought us joy; challenges that have tested us and shaped our character and for people who have guided, inspired and loved us. Most of all thank you for Christ Jesus, without whom we are helpless and hopeless. Take away all anxiety and distractions, so we may pray to you in faith, sing your praises joyfully and listen to your word attentively, knowing you are our Saviour and Lord of all.

Amazing God, your love for us is boundless and we know that we don't deserve it, for our lives fall short of what you would have them be. As we reflect upon our failings, we confess that we have not loved you wholeheartedly, nor have we loved other people as we would want to be loved. Lord, for the sins we have committed and for the good we have failed to do, forgive us in Jesus' name as we turn away from what we know is wrong.

Merciful, loving God, we believe that you hear and answer all our prayers, and that in your great goodness you have pardoned us. Teach us to serve you, so that, by helping and loving others faithfully and joyfully in Jesus' holy name we honour and glorify you for as long as we live. Amen.

***We shall say the prayer that Jesus taught us.***

**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.**

*Thomas Colvin wrote our next hymn during a day training course for evangelists at Chereponi, Ghana in the mid 1960s. I wonder if he was bored by the course, or inspired by it. He set his words to a Ghanaian love song. Hymn number 249, 'Jesu, Jesu, fill us with your love,'*

*Jesu, Jesu*

*Fill us with your love,*

*Show us how to serve*

*The neighbours we have from you.*

**1. Kneels at the feet of his friends,  
Silently washes their feet,  
Master who acts as a slave to them: *Chorus***

**2. Neighbours are rich folk and poor,  
Neighbours are black folk and white,  
Neighbours are nearby and far away: *Chorus***

**3. These are the ones we should serve,  
These are the ones we should love.  
All these are neighbours to us and you: *Chorus***

**4. Kneel at the feet of our friends,  
Silently washing their feet,  
This is the way we should live with you: *Chorus***

© T.S. Colvin { born 1925} – based on a song from northern Ghana

***We come now to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.***

Sovereign God, Light of the world, you are our strength and refuge in times of trouble. You bless us with your love, so, we turn to you, asking you to help us to act as your earthly hands by helping neighbours who are in need or any kind of trouble. Although our own powers are limited and at times the brokenness of our world threatens to overwhelm us, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with power and influence who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord, we are aware of the brokenness of this beautiful, yet fragile world and, as we remember how our Saviour came into the world, homeless and in need, we pray for the poor, disfranchised and marginalised in the world, particularly people from the Developing world whose lives are often brutal, bitter and short. Loving heavenly Father, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all, by campaigning to end poverty here and abroad, by sharing the earth's resources instead of fighting over them and by learning to co-operate with one another, accepting and even celebrating our differences, rather than allowing them to divide us.

Lord, hear our prayer for people who are facing undue pressures in these troubled times: those who have been deeply affected by coronavirus: others who are suffering from long COVID19, or who have lost loved-ones because of it; others who have lost employment, or who are burdened by debt as a result of COVID lockdowns or restrictions; neighbours who are lonely and afraid, or who feel abandoned; people whose relationships have broken down; children whose lives have been constricted and whose education has been damaged; everybody whose spiritual and mental health has been severely challenged during the past two years.

As Jesus came as Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Help them find healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your holy presence in their need. We pray, too, for people who are living with a dementia and their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them and for whom the pandemic has been a living nightmare. Comfort them in their distress and ease their brokenness, O Lord.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care and, as we name them before you, we are confident 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 embrace everybody for whom we pray with your love, so they receive healing, courage, comfort and peace.

Heavenly Father, we pray for the victims of wars, terrorism, prejudice and persecution. Teach leaders of all nations to find better ways of resolving differences with neighbours, rather than resorting to force and inspire them to rule with justice and mercy, for only then can true peace prevail. We pray, in particular for politicians to strive for a peaceful resolution to the situation in Ukraine, which is present threat to world peace.

Hear our prayer for the victims of war and terrorism: those who have lost loved ones; for people who have suffered life-changing injuries to body, mind or spirit and for refugees, who have not only been driven far from their homes, but who face exploitation and danger

in order to try to escape from our inhumanity to one another. Compassionate God, may they all receive the support and encouragement required to rebuild their broken lives. Remember in your mercy people in Afghanistan, Ethiopia and Sudan where strife is threatening to result in catastrophic famine in these countries.

Holy God, we pray for our church, churches in our district and, indeed, for the World Church as we begin to emerge from the shadow of the pandemic. Help us learn new, effective ways to serve our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by proclaiming Good News with one voice and serving him with united hearts.

Lord, we ask you to bless people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: workers in the NHS, carers, scientists who are producing anti-COVID vaccines and medicines, besides key-workers throughout the country. May they remain successful and safe in their work, Lord.

Abba, Father God, look upon us, our families and our friends with compassion. Keep us safe and guide us in your holy ways throughout this year, so we may bear the light of the gospel message into the darkest corners of your kingdom, in the glorious name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Our reading is Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians chapter 13**

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.

But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me. Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. Amen.

*Our next hymn was written by a nephew of the great poet, William Wordsworth. Rt. Revd. Christopher Wordsworth was a Nineteenth Century Bishop of Lincoln and wrote this hymn, based on 1 Corinthians 13, in 1862. We shall sing number 379, 'Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,'*

**1. Gracious Spirit, Holy Ghost,  
Taught by thee, we covet most,  
Of thy gifts at Pentecost,  
Holy, heavenly love.**

**2. Faith that mountains could remove,  
Tongues of earth or heaven above,  
Knowledge, all things, empty prove / Without heavenly love.**

3. Prophecy will fade away,  
Melting in the light of day;  
Love will ever with us stay:  
Therefore give us love.

4. Love is kind, and suffers long,  
Love is meek, and thinks no wrong,  
Love than death itself more strong:  
Therefore give us love.

5. Faith, and hope, and love we see,  
Joining hand in hand, agree;  
But the greatest of the three,  
And the best, is love.

© Christopher Wordsworth {1807 – 1885}

**Sermon:** *“And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”* 1 Cor. 13:13  
Although the thirteenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the churches in Corinth is a hymn to love and is often used at weddings, including my son’s, it was originally a rebuke to a dysfunctional group of early Christians, who were engaged in a power game. One of the problems that faced the troubled Church at Corinth was the desire of many members to be exalted above the others and such exclusivity was threatening to tear the community apart. The Corinthian Church had an extremely mixed congregation: slaves and freed men; wealthy, influential merchant women; Jews and Gentiles. Their differences in social standing, wealth and racial background led to enormous quarrels. Arguments raged over the manner of worship: who was the best preacher, {Paul, Apollos, or Peter}, whether or not to observe Hebrew customs and festivals, the rules for sexual behaviour and the role of women in the church. Even the eucharist was a shambles: they brought their own food and drink, but did not share it, so the wealthy ate themselves sick and became inebriated whilst the slaves stood by hungry and parched.

A major power struggle developed over the relative importance of gifts of the Holy Spirit: apostleship; prophecy; teaching; working miracles; gifts of healing; helpers; administrators and the ability to speak in tongues. Paul told the Corinthians these gifts were granted to build up the community, not to make individuals more important than their neighbours. He continued his argument to the heart of what is required in being a Christian: to set love at the centre of our life.

Paul wrote that, whatever gifts the Spirit has granted us, if we do not use them because we love as Jesus loved, freely and humbly, our gifts will be worthless. Even acts of charity, or self-sacrifice are of no use, if they are not motivated by love. Paul wrote about the qualities of real love: **‘Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.’**

We can see this kind of love in action in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life.

A better translation of **‘patient’** is **‘long-suffering’**; consider how Jesus bore the agony of the cross, the desertion of his disciples and the taunts of the priests and scribes. He did not curse them, but instead asked his Father’s forgiveness for them. **‘Kind’** refers to **‘hesed’**, loving-kindness; think of the people Christ reached out to and restored, tax collectors, Gentiles, prostitutes, lepers, the mentally and spiritually disturbed, all

considered 'beyond the pale' by orthodox Jews. Despite his powers, Jesus refused to turn stones into bread even when he was tormented by hunger, nor did he seek luxury. Instead, he relied on what he was given by hosts and supporters. He did not exalt himself, but, at the Last Supper, it was he, the Master, who washed his disciples' feet, acting like the humblest servant. He displayed neither anger nor discourtesy when he was betrayed and brought before Caiaphas and Pontius Pilate. He persevered through the worst man can do to his fellow man and trusted God the Father enough to endure crucifixion for wretched sinners like us, confident that he would be raised on the third day. Jesus is the personification of **agape**, the boundless love of God. As followers, we are challenged to display his love in our lives, to foreigners, asylum-seekers, or to people we find it hard to like. Here is an example of such love:

Douglas Downes was born in 1878, the son of a Nineteenth Century Methodist minister. He was ordained in the Church of England and began his ministry in Lambeth, one of the poorest parts of London. He found it impossible to reconcile the splendour of his vicarage with the poverty of his parish, so he moved into two empty rooms at the top of an old house, used painted orange boxes as furniture and shared all he had with his poor friends. He opened a Men's Club and befriended tramps, beggars, drunkards and down-and-outs. He didn't rate himself as a preacher, but showed the love of God in practical friendship.

After a short time of service at a Christian College in India and four years as an Army chaplain during the Great War, Douglas helped a monk, called Brother Giles, who worked among tramps on Flowers Farm at Cerne Abbas, Dorset. When Brother Giles fell ill, in 1922, Douglas took over, gave up the title Reverend and became Brother Douglas. He set to work gardening, bee-keeping, jam-making and doing crafts like carving and weaving, drawing the tramps to join in the work. The produce was sold at Dorchester Market. Brother Douglas called the house at Flowers Farm, 'The Home of St. Francis' and adopted a brown habit, like that worn by the Saint he admired. He called his tramps 'way-faring folk', but he expected them to help: those who wouldn't were fed and sent on their way. Life at the Home was joyful, with a mixture of work and prayer, games, singing and dancing.

During the hard times of the 1920s and 1930s, Brother Douglas spoke to the House of Commons about the plight of vagrants – which led to new laws being passed to protect them. He opened five new Homes in 1932, in which tramps learned trades that offered them the security of employment. Brother Douglas also founded "The Brotherhood of St. Francis" a group of dedicated men who ran the homes along the strict lines that Brother Douglas laid down. When he passed away in 1957, aged seventy-nine, called "The Apostle of the Outcasts", Douglas was neither wealthy nor famous in worldly terms, but he was rich in love.

Members of the Corinthian church reasoned, '**we're special; we're God's chosen people!**' They failed to understand that, to God, all people are special and his elect, if they turn to him. God loves us equally, irrespective of our station in life, or our gifts and graces and he calls us to love one another without discrimination. ***May love be our watchword and our guide in life, so that all we do and say reflects the wonderful love of our Saviour to our neighbours, so they may share in the Good News and well-being that Jesus came to bring us. Amen.***

*Early Methodists believed that souls could be won, not only by earnest entreaties in sermons, but by teaching the Christian faith through hymns which the masses could pick up easily. There was a need to find melodies which were appealing, so the hymn writers' words were adapted to fit 'popular' tunes of the day. "Love Divine" is no exception, for Charles Wesley wrote it round a song from John Dryden's 1691 opera, "King Arthur", the music of which was provided by Henry Purcell. The original piece ran, 'Fairest Isle, all isles excelling.....', but Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that ranges between a prayer for Christ to make us a 'new creation' and a song of adoration for the God of love, who is agape – 'Pure, unbounded love'. We conclude our worship as we sing hymn number 503, 'Love divine, all loves excelling,'*

**1. Love divine, all loves excelling,  
Joy of heaven to earth come down,  
Fix in us thy humble dwelling,  
All thy faithful mercies crown.  
Jesus, thou art all compassion,  
Pure, unbounded love thou art;  
Visit us with thy salvation,  
Enter every trembling heart.**

**2. Come, almighty to deliver,  
Let us all thy life receive;  
Suddenly return, and never,  
Never more thy temples leave.  
Thee we would be always blessing,  
Serve thee as thy hosts above,  
Pray, and praise thee without ceasing,  
Glory in thy perfect love.**

**3. Finish then thy new creation,  
Pure and spotless let us be;  
Let us see thy great salvation  
Perfectly restored in thee:  
Changed from glory into glory,  
Till in heaven we take our place,  
Till we cast our crowns before thee,  
Lost in wonder, love and praise!**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

### ***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.**