

A service for 30th July, 2023. (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verse 10

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. 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, we have come to worship you this morning, for you are mighty, faithful and wise. You are the Creator of our universe and all life within it, yet from the earliest times, you sought to reveal yourself to human beings so we might know, love and serve you. Even when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you showed your amazing grace through your Son, Jesus Christ, who not only lived among us, bringing Good News in words and deeds of love, but gave his life at Calvary to redeem us from our sins. His resurrection made him triumphant over death, so we have the free offer of eternal life. Moreover, he sent Holy Spirit to inspire, comfort and guide us in our discipleship. Amazing God, still our anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit, love and truth. Amen.

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

Thank you, 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 everything that has brought us happiness and fulfilment. On this Summer’s day, we thank you for this beautiful world and your enduring love, Most of all we thank you for continuing to love us even when we know we are often faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we admit we don’t live as you want us to, for we do not always love and serve you wholeheartedly. We certainly do not always love our neighbours as we love ourselves and, although we often try to excuse our faithlessness and disobedience, we know how deeply we grieve you and add to the world’s brokenness. Forgive us, Lord and help us change our ways.

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

Loving Lord, warm and mould our hearts and guide us to lead Christ-centred, loving lives, rather than selfish ones. Help us obey your call to serve our neighbours with kindness and generosity.

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 once more. Help us to love and serve you and our neighbours faithfully and joyfully, so our lives honour you in the beautiful name of our Saviour Jesus Christ. 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.

The writer of our second hymn, Karen Lafferty, wrote our next hymn during a financial crisis in 1972, when she was full of anxiety. She turned to Christ in prayer and sought solace by reading the Bible. When she saw Matthew 6, she realised that she would overcome the situation with God's help – and she did!

She said this: 'My life had to be centred around the promises of God's Word and be living proof that a person CAN take God at his word. The lyrics of my songs, coupled with my simple melodies, communicate these truths into the hearts and minds of those who listen.' We shall sing hymn number 254, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God'.

**1. Seek ye first the kingdom of God,
And his righteousness,
And all these things shall be added unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: *Chorus:*

Alleluia, Alleluia,

Alleluia, Allelu–, Alleluia!

**2. Ask, and it shall be given unto you;
Seek, and ye shall find;
Knock, and the door shall be opened unto you;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: *Chorus:*

**3. We shall not live by bread alone,
But by every word
That proceeds from the mouth of the Lord;**

Allelu– , Alleluia: *Chorus:*

© Karen Lafferty

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and for the needs of ourselves and others. When I say 'Your kingdom come', please respond with, 'Your will be done'.

God of all grace, help us to respond to your amazing grace by serving you in whatever way we can. Grant us the power of your Holy Spirit to give us the courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion we need to serve our neighbours as you call us to, but for circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible. We ask you to warm the hearts of and motivate people with power and influence who can really make a difference to the world.

'Your kingdom come', 'Your will be done'.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for those who hold authority in the nations of the world. Guide them in the way of your righteousness, so that justice prevails and people desire fairness for all-comers. Help us build a world where people stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we see others as you see them, as your children who are to be protected and nurtured. Help us to be willing to work together in mutual trust, to always seek the common good, rather than our own selfish desires and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the countries afflicted by famine and natural disasters. Warm the hearts of governments of wealthy countries to give assistance to victims of disasters and bless the work done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Lord of compassion, hear our prayer for peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace among Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Lord of compassion, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Lord of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble: for neighbours who are lonely, anxious, overworked, or who feel undervalued and unloved as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, trusting that you will know their need and will reach out in compassion to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support as well as sympathy, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, hope, strength and peace.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Holy God, grant that this church, churches in our Circuit and, indeed, churches throughout the world may unite in love and action, so we may bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and sometimes hostile world in Jesus' name.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Abba, heavenly Father, look upon us, our friends and families with loving-kindness. In the power of the Holy Spirit, keep us safe, help us resist the temptation to sin, and, most of all help us to live out the gospel message in all that we do and say, so our lives honour your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead good lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 13 verses 31 to 33 & 44 to 52

He told them another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches.”

He told them still another parable:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

He said to them,

“Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” 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!**

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Sermon: Parables of the Kingdom of God: Matthew 13

Matthew’s gospel was written for the Jewish Christian community in Antioch during the last decade of the First Century when serious persecution of the faith by the Roman Empire

was under way. It had started during the rule of Emperor Nero, thirty years earlier, but was about to be followed by what was called “The Reign of Terror” at the behest of Emperor Domitian between 93 and 96 A.D.. Thus Matthew’s retelling of the first two of Jesus’ parables were intended to steady the nerves of members of the Church who were wavering, afraid that they would be swept aside by the might of Rome – all would have remembered the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 after the Jewish rebellion.

The parable of the mustard seed predicted that a huge bush – the Church – would grow from a tiny number of people, representing the mustard seed. Certainly, whilst a mustard seed is not the smallest of all seeds, its development into a plant four or five metres high is remarkable, but so was the growth of the Church from the Day of Pentecost when the hundred and twenty frightened and indecisive followers in that locked upper room in Jerusalem experienced the power of the Holy Spirit and poured outside, proclaiming the glory of God in Christ Jesus. St. Peter, inspired by the Spirit, preached his first sermon, as a result of which three thousand men and unnumbered women and children were baptised in Jesus’ name. Luke recorded how the Good News spread and the Church grew with great speed. The reference to birds nesting in the mustard plant, could mean evil people would find shelter within the Church, but it is more likely to be Jesus’ coded way of saying that Gentiles – all comers – would be welcomed into fellowship, not just the original Jews.

The parable of a small quantity of yeast permeating a large quantity of flour – three measures would produce enough bread for one hundred people – again foresees the dynamic growth of the Church which could not be stopped even by the greatest superpower of its age. Note the word comes from the same Greek root as dynamite – explosive!

However, having given some encouragement, Matthew retold two parables which were a challenge to his listeners and are still a challenge to us two millennia later! What price are we prepared to pay to be part of the kingdom of heaven? In the first parable a man – possibly a hired labourer on one Denarius a day – discovered treasure in a field, reburied it and in great joy sold all he had, so he could buy the field and claim the treasure. Whilst we may well question his integrity, his joyful willingness to commit all he had in order to claim the prize, is the moral of the story: are we ready to offer all for God’s kingdom?

The second account of the merchant who discovered a wonderful pearl and sold everything he had to buy it, is not about Christians giving up all for the kingdom, but of God’s willingness to give his most precious Son to bring Adam’s fallen race into a new, perfect covenant by his death and resurrection. Breath-taking! If we consider what God gave for our salvation: Jesus emptied of all heavenly attributes, except love, to take our flesh and his self-sacrifice at Calvary; what could we give to match such amazing grace?

The moral is clear: if God is willing to give all he has to demonstrate his love for and commitment to us, dare we remain cold-hearted and uncommitted in response? Remember these words from our **Covenant Prayer**: **‘I am no longer my own but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal’**. Do we mean these words when we say them, or do we hope we won’t be called to honour our pledge? Here is an account of a man who made a huge sacrifice for another.

Revd. James Thomas East was born in Kettering, Northamptonshire in 1860 and became a Minister in the Wesleyan Methodist Church at twenty-six. He served in many parts of the country, including Cradley. In fact some members of High Town Ragged School recall playing with Revd. East's children – many years ago. His stipend was frugal, but James East had a burning ambition: to visit the Holy Land and see where Jesus had lived and ministered. He saved as much as he could in order to pay for the cheapest means of visiting Palestine.

He had just raised enough money when he discovered that a member of his church needed an operation, without which he or she would die. This was long before the National Health Service was founded and Saturday Funds could not cover the cost. Revd. East knew that, if he paid the cost of the operation, he would never be able to go to the Holy Land, but he knew the sick person would die if he did not sacrifice his ambition. He may have hesitated, but not for long. The member was operated on successfully and James East holidayed on the east coast instead.

While he was walking along the cliffs overlooking the North Sea, a poem formed in his head:

But if we desire him,	Fishermen talk with him	He is more than near us,
He is close at hand;	By the great North Sea,	If we love him well;
For our native country	As the first disciples	For he seeketh ever
Is our Holy Land.	Did in Galilee.	In our hearts to dwell.

The poem became the Epiphany carol, 'Wise men, seeking Jesus' which, alas, is not in 'Singing the Faith', but I don't want to finish with a grumble. James East fulfilled the last sentence of the Covenant Prayer: **'I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal'. Will we do so for Jesus' sake? Amen.**

We shall close our worship with a hymn written in 1993 by Bernadette Farrell, a Catholic hymn-writer from West Yorkshire. She was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and her works are ecumenical and popular. 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:***

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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.