

A service for 31st January, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 7 to 10

The works of the hands of the Lord are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness. He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever—holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. Amen.

We shall sing a hymn written by David Evans in 1985, which was his reaction to some contemporary worship songs which he felt were over-familiar to the Lord. It is also a hymn to use if your church has a number of over-excited children present! We shall sing hymn number 20, “Be still, for the presence of the Lord.”

1. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here;

Come bow before Him now with reverence and fear.

In Him no sin is found, we stand on holy ground;

Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One is here.

2. Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around;

He burns with holy fire, with splendour He is crowned.

How awesome is the sight, our radiant King of light;

Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around.

3. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place;

He comes to cleanse and heal, to minister His grace.

No work too hard for Him, in faith receive from Him;

Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place. © David J. Evans

Let us turn to the Lord in Prayer.

Eternal Word who created the universe and gave life to everything that lives on this world, you revealed your glory through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Amazing God, whose beloved Son came as Immanuel – God with us and among us – not remote from us, you sent him to live amongst ordinary people like us, to share our joys and sorrows, hopes and fears and trials and temptations, to be the template of how you want us to live.

Heavenly Father, you gave him to the world even though you knew that he would suffer and die to save us from the powers of sin and death. Take away any distraction or anxiety, so we may freely offer our praise and adoration for all that you have been, are and shall be which we know in your boundless, everlasting love. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say ‘Lord have mercy’, please respond with ‘Lord, forgive us’. Let us pray once more.

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins.

For the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow him, and afraid to bear the cross: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has caused the poverty of our worship, the formality and selfishness of our prayers, our neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, and our hesitating witness for Christ: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has led us to misuse your gifts, evade our responsibilities, and fail to be good stewards of your creation: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

For the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn and selfish in sharing your love with others: Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive us.**

Have mercy on us, O Lord, help us to change our ways, draw us near to you and fill us with your Holy Spirit, so he may wash away our sins.

Loving heavenly Father, you hear and answer our prayers. In your grace you proclaim our sins forgiven and you call us to follow you. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so we may serve you and our neighbours with joyful, faithful hearts in the name of Christ the One true Light. 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.

In 1740, Charles Wesley heard a Moravian friend, Peter Bohler, say, 'If I had a thousand tongues I would praise Jesus with them all.' The result was the hymn which we are going to sing. Number 364, 'O for a thousand tongues to sing'

1. O for a thousand tongues to sing

**My great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of his grace.**

**2. My gracious Master and my God,
Assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad
The honours of your name.**

**3. Jesus – the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.**

**4. He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free;
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.**

**5. He speaks; and, listening to his voice,
New life the dead receive;
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice;
The humble poor believe.**

**6. See all your sins on Jesus laid:
The Lamb of God was slain;
His soul was once an offering made
That all may heaven gain.**

**7. In Christ, our Head, you then shall know,
Shall feel, your sins forgiven,
Anticipate your heaven below,
And own that love is heaven.**

In our prayers of intercession when I say, 'O Lord, hear our prayer', your response is 'When we call, answer us'. Let us pray.

Merciful and Loving God, as we see so much brokenness amid the beauty of this world, not all of which is the result of COVID19, the Media makes us aware of the huge number of people who suffer as a result of our inability to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, so we turn to you in prayer, asking you to bring healing and wholeness, for although so many situations lie beyond our power, to you all things are possible. Certainly, Lord, we want to seek the well-being of people whose lives touch ours, so we ask you to grant us the courage, faith and compassion we need to bring healing rather than hurt to our neighbours.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Loving God, we pray for our community: may we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches, or by supporting the work done by food banks, street pastors, the Salvation Army, organizations that serves the poor and vulnerable in our society, or by supporting Christian Aid, All We Can and other relief organizations that address the grievous poverty in the Developing World.

We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve our communities and support the poor and broken-hearted. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. In the midst of our everyday lives, surprise us with glimpses of the glorious, humble love at the heart of existence.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Loving God, we pray that the leaders of the world learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. We pray that the leaders of countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, will turn and seek mercy and justice in their dealings. Remember in your compassion, all victims of warfare, terrorism and oppression and grant them healing in body, mind and spirit. Guide our leaders and us with your light to the true wisdom of justice and peace, of freedom and respect for every human life.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and wisdom to do what is right whether or not it is popular or politically expedient.

We ask your blessing upon the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe. As we remain in lockdown, we feel disempowered, confused, unsure of what to pray for. Hear and answer the groaning of our spirit and grant us the wisdom and courage we need to face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your redemptive love.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Heavenly Father, hear our prayer for people who are sick in body, mind or spirit, for all who are suffering long-term effects of coronavirus and those who are living with a dementia, their families, friends and carers. May they receive the care and support they need at this time of crisis and may they experience your presence in their need, so they find healing, peace of mind, renewed strength and comfort.

We pray for everybody who is facing unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time we usually associate with joyful celebration. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer friendship and practical support to them.

In a time of silence, we pray for everyone know who needs your help.....Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience your healing, comfort, hope and peace.

O Lord, hear our prayer: **When we call, answer us.**

Abba, Father God, bless us, our families and our friends. Fill us with the love and grace of Christ Jesus, so that our thoughts, words and deeds offer peace and love to everyone around us and bring glory to your holy name. Amen.

We continue our worship with a hymn by James Montgomery, a radical newspaper proprietor in Sheffield, a fierce campaigner against boy chimney sweeps who had to climb up chimneys to sweep them and a committed opponent of slavery long before William Wilberforce began his campaign. Hymn number 228, 'Hail to the Lord's Anointed,'

**1. Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
Great David's greater Son!
Hail, in the time appointed,
His reign on earth begun!
He comes to break oppression,
To set the captives free,
To take away transgression / And rule in equity.**

**2. He comes, with succour speedy,
To those who suffer wrong;
To help the poor and needy,
And bid the weak be strong;
To give them songs for sighing,
Their darkness turn to light,
Whose souls, condemned and dying,
Were precious in his sight.**

**3. He shall come down like showers
Upon the fruitful earth;
Love, joy and hope, like flowers,
Spring in his path to birth;
Before him, on the mountains,
Shall peace the herald go;
And righteousness, in fountains,
From hill to valley flow.**

**4. Kings shall fall down before him
And gold and incense bring;
All nations shall adore him,
His praise all people sing;
To him shall prayer unceasing
And daily vows ascend,
His kingdom still increasing,
A kingdom without end.**

**5. O'er every foe victorious,
He on his throne shall rest;
From age to age more glorious,**

**All-blessing and all-blest.
The tide of time shall never
His covenant remove;
His name shall stand for ever,
His changeless name of Love.**

© James Montgomery (1771 – 1854)

The Old Testament reading is Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15 to 20

The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him. For this is what you asked of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said,
“Let us not hear the voice of the LORD our God nor see this great fire anymore, or we will die.”

The LORD said to me:

“What they say is good. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I myself will call him to account. But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death.” Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 1 verses 21 to 28

They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law. Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out,

“What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!”

“Be quiet!” said Jesus sternly. “Come out of him!” The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek. The people were all so amazed that they asked each other,

“What is this? A new teaching—and with authority! He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him.” News about him spread quickly over the whole region of Galilee. 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: “What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!” Mark 1:27

Mark’s gospel is a voyage of discovery for its readers, because until chapter eight Jesus did not refer to himself as the Messiah; nor would he acknowledge such a title from those who attributed the name to him. The first half of the gospel is called “The Messianic Secret” by many commentators, for readers share the amazement and confusion of the disciples as they journeyed with the Lord, witnessing healings and miracles, listening to his teaching and his extraordinary outreach to the marginalised, the ceremonially unclean and Gentiles. Like the best authors, Mark doesn’t bludgeon us with, “**This is Jesus, the Son of God and our Messiah**”; instead, he lets us work out for ourselves the nature of Christ Jesus, like the disciples, by presenting us with evidence that led Simon Peter to confess, “**You are the Christ.**” We then journey through Christ’s rejection, passion, death and resurrection – and in the original text it ends with the women fleeing from the empty tomb, too afraid to speak about what they had seen and been told. Again, Mark presents us with the evidence and leaves us to draw our own conclusions about the nature and person of Jesus of Nazareth.

In our text from Deuteronomy, the Israelites had appealed at Horeb that God should no longer speak to them directly, because they feared his presence would overwhelm and destroy them. Consequently, Moses promised them that God would raise a prophet, who would act as his intercessor, speaking for him to the Israelites, guiding them to follow his precepts. Moses bade the Israelites to obey the prophet, or to face the consequences. The Hebrew Bible shows how God indeed fulfilled his promise with prophets who were mighty in both words and deeds: Elijah fed the widow of Zarephath and her son throughout a drought, even though she only possessed a handful of flour and a small amount of oil; Elijah and Elisha each raised a boy from the dead; Elisha healed Naaman of a severe skin disease – possibly leprosy. However, perhaps the prophet most in keeping with our reading was Micaiah, who contradicted the prophet Zedekiah, son of Kenaanah, after he predicted a victory for King Ahab at Ramoth Gilead. The furious Zedekiah struck and abused Micaiah, after which Micaiah was imprisoned by King Ahab on very basic rations for making his unfavourable prophecy. However, Micaiah was God’s mouthpiece, so both King Ahab and Zedekiah perished in the battle.

Time and time again, God provided prophets, only for the people to reject and ignore them, as a result of which the Northern kingdom fell in 721 BC, whilst Judea was conquered by the Babylonians, Jerusalem was destroyed, its people led into years of exile and the temple plundered and razed to the ground in 687BC. For more than five hundred years of suffering and strife, Jews looked for God’s anointed, the Messiah, and Mark’s gospel points to Jesus as the Messiah, demonstrating how Jesus not only performed miraculous healings and feedings, but had power over both evil and the natural elements, which made him greater than the greatest of the prophets. It also highlighted how Jesus revealed God’s nature and purpose in words and deeds.

Today’s passage from Mark related how, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus was invited to preach by the ruler of the synagogue at Capernaum. Mark did not say what text Jesus used, but he recorded that he amazed his listeners because ‘**he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.**’ In other words, Jesus interpreted the scriptures in his own right, rather than trying to declare his

authority by quoting from the Talmud – a book of legal code and religious customs founded upon rabbinic teachings over many centuries – from the Midrash, which fills in gaps in Bible stories, or explains them. Jesus did not borrow others' words, but used his own in a lively, challenging way. Jesus' preaching was not dull quibbling about points from Torah; it was inspiring, unconventional and riveting – nobody would nod off in Christ's sermons!

However, at this point, a man possessed by an evil spirit cried out, "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" In my role as MHA Chaplain, I became used to interruptions when I led worship at Waterside House, which is a dementia care home, but nevertheless, I would be as perplexed as any other preacher if somebody from a congregation in church interrupted my sermon with a challenge like the disturbed man at Capernaum. However, Jesus recognized three significances of the interruption. The man had previously worshipped at the synagogue without his inner evil being challenged by the preaching of the Scribes and Pharisees, yet Jesus' words shook his very soul. The evil within the man recognized that Jesus had come to break his power, for it knew Christ's identity, though no one else there did. Therefore, the power of evil tried to trap Jesus by declaring him 'the Holy One of God' – had Jesus acknowledged the title as his, he would have been charged with blasphemy. Instead, Christ exclaimed, "**Phimotheti!**", sometimes translated as "Be quiet", or "Hold your peace", but is really a blunter, "Shut up!" for "**phimos**" means to muzzle, so it was a command, not a request. When Jesus ordered the evil spirit to leave the man, it convulsed him and left him prostrate, but otherwise unharmed.

It is hardly surprising that the congregation at the synagogue was filled with amazement and asked one another, "What is this? A new teaching – and with authority!" After all, his teaching was matched by his control over the forces of evil. News of Jesus spread throughout Galilee and presumably gained the attention of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, which is why Scribes and Pharisees began to seek out and oppose our Lord, because his teaching challenged the authority of the established order. Jesus didn't indulge in legalistic quibbling over Torah, he differentiated between law and customs and he called listeners to repent, which means more than saying "Sorry". Christ would have used the Hebrew, "Shub", which means "return to God", to turn one hundred and eighty degrees from the path towards sin to the straight and narrow path of righteousness. Repentance means changing our hearts and lifestyles from self-interest to selfless love, love that took Christ to Calvary to redeem sinners like us.

Discipleship is not guaranteed to be easy, even post COVID, for we shall face opposition from an increasingly secular society which may well seek to blame God for the pandemic. Nonetheless, Jesus calls us to serve him wholeheartedly, defending kingdom values without being judgmental, caring for people less fortunate than ourselves and doing so as joyfully as possible, for if others can see something special about the way we speak and act, their curiosity will be aroused and they, too, may ask, "**What is this?**" They will be open to hear the gospel message and turn to Christ Jesus in faith and love. Amen.

Our final hymn is from the Iona Community and was co-written by John Bell and Graham Maule. Usually, their hymns are set to Scots folk tunes, but this is set to a French Carol. We'll listen to hymn number 251, 'Jesus, Christ is waiting,'

1. Jesus Christ is waiting,
Waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour,
All alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely, too:
Make me, friend or stranger,
Fit to wait on you.

2. Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry, too:
In the kingdom's causes,
Let me rage with you.

3. Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets,
Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity, too:
Let my care be active,
Healing, just like you.

4. Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph, too:
Where good conquers evil,
Let me dance with you.

5. Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few:
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.

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

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.