

A service for All Souls – 31st October, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 25 verses 4 to 7

Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Saviour, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Bishop Timothy Dudley Smith, a suffragan Bishop of Thetford, who recognized the might and glory of our timeless God. We shall sing hymn number 428, 'Lord, for the years'

**1. Lord, for the Years, your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.**

**2. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.**

**3. Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.**

**4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt you,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.**

**5. Lord for ourselves; in living pow'r remake us –
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.**

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Let us pray.

Timeless God, your Word created the universe from darkness and chaos; you breathed life into every living being and you provide the needs of your creation by your constant love. Although your power and wisdom are as immeasurable as the height, depth and breadth of your love, you have cared for sinful humanity so much you have tried to draw us close to you from the beginning of our history. When we would not listen to the prophets and patriarchs and rebelled against you, instead of rejecting, or punishing us, you too our mortal frame and came to us as Jesus Christ.

Jesus lived among us, revealing your true nature in words and deeds, and died at Calvary to atone for the sins of the world. When he was raised, Jesus broke the power of death and offers us new life through faith in him, not by any merit of our own, nor by our works, but through his grace. Therefore, Lord, we come to you with joyful hearts, asking you to take away all anxieties that may distract us from our worship. Amen.

Let us offer a prayer of thanksgiving and confession to the Lord. We pray once more.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the beauty and fruitfulness of autumn, for all the good things we enjoy; for people

who have guided, inspired and loved us, for people who have faithfully served in the name of Christ Jesus and who have witnessed to your goodness and glory, but most of all thank you for loving us despite how often we fail to live as you call us to.

Merciful Lord, pardon us for failing to love our neighbours as we know we ought, for our words and actions that have hurt others and for times when we have not helped people in need or distress. Forgive us, too, when we fail to love and serve you wholeheartedly, when we don't commit ourselves to you and answer our call. Help us to change our ways, so that our lives are Christ-centred, not self-centred.

Gracious and faithful God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and in boundless grace you have forgiven us. Therefore, Lord, as you offer us a fresh start, fill us now with the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim and live out Good News in the blessed name of Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

We shall say the prayer Jesus 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.

Our next hymn was written by another bishop, William Walsham How, Bishop of Bedford which effectively meant the East End of London and, later, Bishop of Wakefield. He had two nicknames: 'The Omnibus Bishop' and 'The children's Bishop', the former because, when he served in the East End, he travelled in full regalia on horse buses and trams, rather than in his bishop's coach and the latter because he loved to make children laugh. We shall sing hymn number 745, 'For all the saints who from their labours rest'.

- 1. For all the saints who from their labours rest,
Who thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy name, O Jesus, be for ever blest: Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 2. Thou wast their rock, their fortress and their might;
Thou, Lord, their captain in the well-fought fight;
Thou in the darkness still their one true light: Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 3. O may thy soldiers, faithful, true and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win, with them, the victor's crown of gold! Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 4. O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in thee, for all are thine: Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 5. And when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,
Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong: Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 6. The golden evening brightens in the west;
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest: Alleluia, alleluia!**
- 7. But lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;**

The King of Glory passes on his way! Alleluia, alleluia!

**8. From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost: Alleluia, alleluia!**

© *William Walsham How (1823 – 1897)*

We come to pray for people throughout our world.

Lord of all, we recognize your faithful loving-kindness in blessing us by meeting our daily needs and for sending your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us to, offering healing and hope to our sin-broken world, for we know many people are not as blessed as we are. Therefore, we pray for our neighbours, those near to us or far away: for people who face hardship and suffering, here and abroad. Grant us the faith and compassion to act as your earthly hands, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

Heavenly King, following the murder of Sir David Amess, hear our prayer for MPs and councillors as they act as our representatives and seek to improve our lives. We pray that the behaviour of a few fanatics will not dissuade politicians from meeting the public face to face, but we pray, too, that they may do so without endangering their lives. Help us treat them with respect, irrespective whether or not we share their views, bearing in mind that democracy is a wonderful, yet fragile system.

Lord of all, inspire the rulers of the nations to seek justice and mercy in their dealings, for only when justice and mercy exist will real peace prevail. We pray for an end to the many conflicts around the world that cause not only injury, death and destruction, but swell the number of refugees who are seeking to escape from terror and suffering. In your mercy, remember the victims of warfare, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, especially at present people in Afghanistan as they face Taliban rule once more.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents, warn us of the effects of climate change and our collective failure as stewards of this planet. We offer our prayer for all disaster-stricken people and pray for them to receive swift, practical aid. Most of all, we pray that all humankind comes to recognize the need for change before it is too late, so that future generations will have a habitable world in which to live.

God our Saviour, we ask your blessing upon people who have worked steadfastly to support us throughout this pandemic: the NHS, carers, scientists and key-workers throughout the country. May they be successful and safe in their endeavours, dear Lord.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, look with compassion on all who are sick in body, mind, or spirit. Grant them healing, renewed strength and hope, not only as a result of the care and support they receive, but by experiencing your 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. Reassure them in their confusion, comfort them in their distress and let them feel loved and valued even in the midst of their brokenness. Remember in your mercy our neighbours who, as a result of the pandemic, are lonely, afraid, unemployed, or feel undervalued and unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, in particular people lost during this pandemic.....
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, in which there is to be found healing, courage, comfort and peace.

Sovereign God, we pray for our church, our Circuit and for the World Church. We remember both past generations who have served faithfully and have come home to you and everybody who is continuing to serve today. Lord, unite us in love and outreach, so our words and actions bring good news to our neighbours and reveal that Jesus is indeed, the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

We pray for ourselves: where we are weak in body, give us delight in the strengths we possess; where we have abundant energy, help us use it wisely and well; where we feel downcast and lost, grant us faith to light our way to where we should be. Loving Lord, we don't know what others will ask of us, so we pray for the Spirit to guide and encourage us when times are difficult, for vision and hope to enable us to take a risk for the sake of the gospel and courage to remain true to the teaching of Christ.

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 John chapter 11 verses 32 to 44

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said,

"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.

"Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said,

"See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance.

"Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days." Then Jesus said,

"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice,

"Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Amen.

Our next hymn was written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community, who frequently use Scots ballad tunes as settings, but this hymn is sung to the folksong, 'O Waly Waly'. We shall sing hymn number 746, 'For all the saints who showed your love'

**1. For all the saints who showed your love
In how they lived and where they moved,
For mindful women, caring men,
Accept our gratitude again**

**2. For all the saints who loved your name,
Whose faith increased the Saviour's fame,
Who sang your songs and shared your word,**

Accept our gratitude, good Lord.

**3. For all the saints who named your will,
And saw your kingdom coming still
Through selfless protest, prayer and praise,
Accept the gratitude we raise.**

**4. Bless all whose will or name or love
Reflects the grace of heaven above.
Though unacclaimed by earthly powers,
Your life through theirs has hallowed ours.**

© J. Bell (b. 1949) & G. Maule (b. 1958)

Sermon : *All Souls Day*

What image comes to mind when you hear the word 'saint'? Do you think of ceramic statues in cathedrals, high Anglican and Roman Catholic churches? Perhaps you think of particular saints, such as Augustine, who brought Christianity to the United Kingdom, or Joan of Arc, the Fourteenth Century French warrior and martyr? Certainly, most of us will probably consider saints as perfect people – and that is often very far from the truth. Take the example of St. Francis of Assisi, who was born as Giovanni Bernardone in Assisi in 1182, the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. Giovanni was a spoilt boy, who was allowed to grow into a quarrelsome young man with an ambition to become a famous soldier. However, after he was wounded and taken prisoner in civil war, Giovanni heard Jesus call him to, 'repair my broken church', and immediately thought Jesus meant a nearby church that was falling down.

Therefore, as soon as he was freed, Giovanni decided to pay for repairs to that local church by selling some bales of his father's finest cloth without first asking if it would be all right to do so. Giovanni's father was so furious, he took him to court and disowned him publicly. Giovanni realised that wealth had taken him from God, so he took off his clothes and left court covered only with a cloak, determined to live in poverty – like Jesus. He began to preach and came to realise that the 'falling house' was in fact the whole Church, not just a building, so he asked the Pope if he could form a monastery of like-minded men. At first the Pope refused but he relented, so, in 1209, Giovanni was allowed to found his own monastery. He took the name Francis, so his order of monks are known as Franciscans. The aims of Franciscans are to serve the poor, to refuse all luxuries and to be men of peace. Francis was indeed changed by his call to become more and more Christ-like in how he lived, but his early years were far from saintly.

In the Old Testament, Israelites were often called saints because they were separated from other nations and consecrated to God, but in the New Testament, Paul used saints for believers in Christ, who had been reconciled to God by faith and were inwardly purified. Indeed, his meaning for saints is of people who are cleansed by Jesus' blood and renewed by the Holy Spirit, thereby separated from the world and consecrated to God. In effect, all Christians are thereby saints in that sense, so All Saints' Day is a celebration of people whose lives have been lived faithfully after the pattern of Jesus, rather than simply of people canonised by Church.

Isaiah shared a vision of God hosting a feast for everyone who's been faithful to him – thrown open to all-comers, not simply to Jews. This was a remarkable concept when Judeans were languishing in Babylonian exile, but it is an appeal for them to remain true to Lord when everything they held dear, including freedom, had been taken from them. This is where we can move from "All Saints" to "All Souls", when we remember people who we've loved and who have passed into new life.

Gospel reading continues John's account of how Jesus had received news his close friend, Lazarus, who was very ill at his home in Bethany, near Jerusalem. Jesus was already going to Jerusalem to celebrate Hanukkah, but he put off going to his friend and so reached Bethany four days after Lazarus had died. He'd been buried within twenty-four hours, according to Hebrew custom, so Jesus was greeted first by Martha and then by Mary, both of whom said, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' Jesus was deeply moved by their grief and asked where Lazarus had been laid. Although he knew delay had been necessary so he could demonstrate the clearest sign of his divinity – power over life and death – Christ was overcome, not only by the grief of Lazarus' sisters, but also by his friend's physical death. In the shortest sentence in the New Testament, 'Jesus wept'. Yes, he raised Lazarus from tomb, intact despite his being in the sepulchre for so long, but Jesus showed how God grieves with us when we lose someone close. God isn't uncaring & unfeeling, but shares our joys & woes, triumphs & failures, hopes & fears. As somebody who's taken many funerals, I've shared families' grief, but I've sometimes been invited to share an amusing memory of person whose funeral I've taken, to take some of death's sting from the proceedings.

Please notice I said, 'passed into new life', when I spoke of people we've lost, for I believe passionately there's life beyond our earthly span, not a continuation of what we know now, which Lazarus experienced between when Jesus raised him and his eventual death. Jesus told his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going." That's a clear statement of death not having the final word, because Christ achieved victory over death when he was raised on the first Easter Day.

As a Methodist, I use word 'saints' for all who've followed Christ, not just those who've been canonised by the Church. Thus, my saints have their weaknesses and flaws, but I tell you, Jesus has drawn them close to him in new life, as he'll draw us to him when our time comes. Thus, let's remember and give thanks for people we've loved and lost awhile, confident we'll meet them again in the fullness of time.

However, when my father knew he was dying, he said, "Don't paint me as a plaster saint, or I'll come back to haunt you!" and I know what Dad meant. Try to recall those dear to you with both their virtues and vices – the irritating as well as lovable things about them, so they're rounded people. If some memories make you giggle, don't feel guilty any more than if others make you weep, for laughter and tears help us to come to terms with loss and can bring us peace, the peace Jesus said he'll give us: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." Therefore, let us also seek to serve the Lord as faithfully and warm-heartedly as we can, imitating Jesus' loving example, so we, too, can be deemed 'saints' of Christ. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Marty Haugen, an American hymn-writer the same age as Graham Kendrick. Although he was raised in the American Lutheran Church, he was first employed as a church musician in a Roman Catholic parish during the major changes in music and liturgy following Vatican 2. This hymn reminds us that the church is a people, not a building and everyone should be

welcomed into our fellowship. We shall sing hymn number 409, 'Let us build a house where love can dwell'.

1. Let us build a house where love can dwell

And all can safely live,

A place where saints and children tell

How hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,

Rock of faith and vault of grace;

Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: *Chorus*

All are welcome,

All are welcome,

All are welcome in this place.

2. Let us build a house where prophets speak,

And words are strong and true,

Where all God's children dare to seek

To dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness

And of symbol of God's grace;

Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus: *Chorus*

3. Let us build a house where love is found

In water, wine and wheat:

A banquet hall on holy ground

Where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus,

Is revealed in time and space;

As we share in Christ the feast that frees us: *Chorus*

4. Let us build a house where hands will reach

Beyond the wood and stone

To heal and strengthen, serve and teach,

And live the Word they've known.

Here the outcast and the stranger

Bear the image of God's face;

Let us bring an end to fear and danger: *Chorus*

5. Let us build a house where all are named,

Their songs and visions heard

And loved and treasured, taught and claimed

As words within the Word.

Built of tears and cries and laughter,

Prayers of faith and songs of grace,

Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: *Chorus*

© Marty Haugen (born 1950)

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.