

A Service for 3rd October, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 26 verses 8 to 10

Good and upright is the LORD; therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. Amen.

We come before Almighty God aware of our need for his guidance, so it is appropriate to begin with a hymn by one of our best modern writers, Bernadette Farrell whose hymns span all denominations. We shall sing 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:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray.

God of Creation, whose Word brought life to our universe, whose love sustains that life and through whose grace we may call you Abba, Father, we are here to worship and glorify your holy Name. We rejoice in the beauty and fruitfulness of autumn, the richness of your harvest and your great gift of Christ Jesus, who gave his life as the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the whole world and was raised from the tomb so death does not have the last word.

Take away any anxiety or distraction that prevents us dwelling upon your holiness and beauty and help us to sing your praises joyfully, to pray to you in faith and to receive and understand your message today.

A prayer of thanksgiving and confession. Let us pray.

Everlasting Lord, we have come to thank you for all you have been, all you are, and all you shall be evermore. Thank you for your gift of life, for this beautiful, self-sustaining world in which we live, for the many blessings we have received from you and which we continue to receive from you, but above all else, thank you for loving us even when we stray from you, for times when we are loveless and unlovable, for we know you seek us out and restore us.

Heavenly Father, forgive us when we fail to answer your call, or respond to your voice, whether because we are too busy, or self-absorbed, fearful or plain obstinate. Guide us, O Lord, for we know that whereas your love for us is boundless and unfailing, we don't always share your love with our neighbours and can be judgmental of the way other people look or behave. Lord, in sorrow we confess that we are selfish, self-centred and hard-hearted at times, so we come to ask for both forgiveness and the grace to change our ways for the better.

Lord, there are times when we fail to see the gifts and graces of those around us, when we criticize, undermine, or let down other people, whereas you see the potential of everybody. Teach us to see people around us through Christ Jesus' eyes, so we can love and serve them as he does.

Faithful God, you help us grow and develop in faith and works. You offer the promise of forgiveness and new life. Help us to both accept your love and to work with you to build up your Kingdom, in response to your steadfast mercy. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

We shall say the prayer that Jesus gave 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.

Our next hymn was written in 1968 by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, a gifted Methodist minister. It was chosen for the service at Westminster Abbey, uniting the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches into the United Reformed Church in 1972. Hymn number 346, 'Christ is the world's light, Christ and none other'.

1. Christ is the world's Light, Christ and none other;

Born in our darkness, he became our Brother.

If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:

Glory to God on high.

2. Christ is the world's Peace, Christ and none other;

No one can serve him and despise another.

Who else unites us, one in God the Father?

Glory to God on high.

3. Christ is the world's Life, Christ and none other;

Sold once for silver, murdered here, our Brother –

He, who redeems us, reigns with God the Father:

Glory to God on high.

4. Give God the glory, God and none other;

Give God the glory, Spirit, Son and Father;

Give God the glory, God in us, my Brother:

Glory to God on high.

We come to our prayers of intercession.

Lord of all, we recognize your faithfulness in meeting our daily needs and for loving us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus, to show us how to live as you want us to and to offer 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, both here and abroad. Grant us the faith and compassion to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out and offering practical support to neighbours who are in need or distress, but where the best we can offer is inadequate, we ask you to intervene, for nothing is impossible to you.

Lord of all, bring forth leaders who have the wisdom and compassion to care for the well-being of the people they rule over. Teach them to seek justice and to deal mercifully, for only when justice and mercy are present will real peace prevail. We pray for an end to conflicts that cause not only injury death and destruction, but swell the number of refugees who are seeking to escape from terror and suffering. Hear our prayer for the victims of warfare and terrorism across the world, especially at present in Afghanistan. Help us to be your instruments of peace: where there is hatred, let us bring your love; where we have been wronged, let us offer forgiveness; where there is despair, let us offer hope; where there is ignorance, let us offer the light of truth and understanding and where there is prejudice, let us offer loving-kindness in return.

Lord of grace, help us to play what part we can to build a better world by seeking justice for all-comers, by striving 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 our differences, rather than being divided by them.

Lord of life, recent terrible floods and wildfires on several continents, are salutary reminders about 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. May they 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. 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 are lonely, afraid, unemployed, or overworked, besides all who feel undervalued and unloved and everyone who has lost loved ones, in particular people lost during this pandemic.

In a time of silence, we bring to mind people around us who are in special need of your care. 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 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, hear us as we pray for your Church, both local and worldwide: unite us in love and outreach, so everybody may believe 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, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us live righteous lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers and thereby glorifying your name, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Our gospel reading is Mark chapter 10 verses 2 to 16

Some Pharisees came and tested him by asking,
"Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

"What did Moses command you?" he replied. They said,

"Moses permitted a man to write a certificate of divorce and send her away."

"It was because your hearts were hard that Moses wrote you this law," Jesus replied.

"But at the beginning of creation God 'made them male and female'. 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore, what God has joined together, let man not separate."

When they were in the house again, the disciples asked Jesus about this. He answered,

"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."

People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." And he took the children in his arms, put his hands on them and blessed them. Amen.

We continue with a hymn written by Michael Forster, a writer and a retired URC minister. His first career was as a music teacher before training for ordination, since when he's been minister of three churches and a senior chaplain in a large NHS mental health, community and learning disability Trust. He makes hand-crafted furniture and writes up his projects for craft magazines. The hymn may be new to you, but it is sung to the "Londonderry Air". Hymn number 615, 'Let love be real, in giving and receiving'.

1. Let love be real in giving and receiving,

Without the need to manage and to own;

A haven free from posing and pretending,

Where every weakness may be safely known.

Give me your hand, along the desert pathway,

Give me your love wherever we may go. {Chorus}

As God loves us, so let us love each other:

With no demands, just open hands and space to grow.

2. Let love be real, not grasping or confining,
That strange embrace that holds yet sets us free;
That helps us face the risk of truly living,
And makes us brave to be what we might be.
Give me your strength, when all my words are weakness;
Give me your love, in spite of all you know. {Chorus}

3. Let love be real, with no manipulation,
No secret wish to harness or control;
Let us accept each other's incompleteness,
And share the joy of learning to be whole.
Give me your hope, through dreams and disappointments;
Give me your trust when all my failings show {Chorus} © Michael Forster (born 1946)

Sermon: "What God has joined together, let man not separate." Mark 10:9

Our gospel reading deals with human relationships and the thorny question of divorce. This passage has caused great difficulties for Christians who have been divorced and whose relationships with the church have become strained, even if they were classed as the 'innocent' party, because Jesus appears to prohibit the practice. In fact, the passage needs to be put into context before any such conclusion is drawn.

Jesus was responding to a loaded question from Pharisees, who wanted him to compromise himself. At that time there were two rival schools of thought among the Jews, one of Rabbi **SHAMMAI**, and the other of Rabbi **HILLEL**. Supporters of Shammai maintained that a man could not legally divorce his wife, except for sexual unfaithfulness, whereas Hillel taught that a man might divorce his wife for many other – often trivial – reasons, including for cooking a bad meal, or if he was attracted to another woman who pleased him better. (*Sorry ladies, the converse did not apply!*) Had Jesus taken the side of either of the rabbis, he would have made himself unpopular with many Jews, so he responded by asking them what Moses' taught about divorce in the Torah.

When the Pharisees replied that Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and send his wife away, Jesus seized upon the word '**allowed**', for it was not a command but a concession to the hard-heartedness of some men, for whom real commitment was lacking. Essentially, it was a compromise between easy divorce, or open adultery, so Jesus moved to Genesis, the first part of the Law, pointing out that God's original intention was for marriage to be the closest possible bond between two human beings, closer even than parental affection, certainly not something to be dissolved for expediency's sake.

When Jesus told his disciples, '**Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery,**' it appears at first glance that he condemns the remarriage of a divorcee – and certainly this view was held by many in the church until recently. **However, the words suggest that the remarriage follows hard on the heels of the divorce and that the divorcee was already in a relationship with his / her new partner beforehand.** In other words, such a divorce was a wilful circumventing of God's intention for marriage and since there was no valid reason for the marriage to end, the remarriage was an adulterous sham.

Both readings refer to covenants, the first between human beings and God, the second between two people. Covenant is often seen as an agreement, or a contract, but the Hebrew word, **berith**, means to shackle or chain together, implying a much

stronger bond – a real commitment. A recent report said that one marriage in three in the UK ends in divorce, often resulting in hardship and heartbreak, especially if children are involved. Common wisdom tells us to steer clear if anybody's marriage is heading for the rocks, but perhaps we should offer our support in a quiet way, not by interfering, nor taking sides, but by encouraging the couple to try counselling to see whether or not their marriage can be saved and being there to support them if it cannot. An opportunity to talk – or pray together – may open up channels of communication that a troubled relationship may have closed down. Whatever happens, we should not ostracize people if their marriages fail, for only the shallowest don't suffer in those circumstances.

What of our covenant with God? We are bound to him by faith in Christ Jesus, through whom the Father's glory and grace is revealed. In Jesus we see God with arms open wide to embrace us, to draw us close to him with bonds not of steel chain but of love. God loves us despite our failures and sins, so much so that Christ opened his arms wide at Calvary to die in order that our sins may be forgiven, for God's faithful love knows no bounds. God's love for us is free and unconditional; he calls us to love him and one another in return.

These readings challenge our attitudes to God and one another. Is our love for God and each other conditional? Was Satan right in the Book of Job when he implied that we are only fair-weather friends and will turn against the Lord when misfortune strikes? Jesus remained faithful to his Father throughout his passion and crucifixion. Even his cry, '**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?**' was not a cry of despair, but his expression of Psalm 22 in which the suffering servant was vindicated and restored. Do we only love neighbours who look like us, act like us, or share our views, or are we like Christ Jesus who reached out to the marginalised, to outcasts, to Gentiles and cared for them without asking for anything in return? Are we like the sanctimonious crowd who brought a woman caught in adultery to our Lord, expecting him to condemn her, or do we recognize our own need for grace and offer support and friendship to people whose lives are broken, whether through misfortune, or their own foolishness? **Loving Lord, help us to bind ourselves to you and to one another with the covenant love of Christ our Saviour. Amen.**

We close our worship with a hymn by Rev. John Bode, who was Rector at Castle Camps, Cambridge. His daughter and two sons attended confirmation classes, so that they could make their vows together in 1866. The poetic Rector decided that such a special occasion deserved a special hymn which is not only a dedication of oneself to Christ, but recognises that the path of discipleship is not an easy one. It is an appeal to Jesus to guide us through life. Hymn number 563, 'O Jesus, I have promised'.

**1. O Jesus, I have promised
To serve you to the end;
Lord, be for ever near me,
My Master and my Friend:
I shall not fear the battle
If you are by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If you will be my Guide.**

**2. O let me feel you near me:
The world is ever near;**

I see the sights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear;
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within;
But, Jesus, now draw nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.

3. O let me hear you speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
Lord, speak and make me listen,
O guardian of my soul.

4. O Jesus, you have promised
To all who follow you,
That where you are in glory
Your servant shall be, too;
And Jesus, I have promised
To serve you to the end;
O give me grace to follow
My Master and my Friend!

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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.