

A service for 3rd September, 2023 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 1 to 3

Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. Amen.

We open with one of Graham Kendrick's early compositions. Hymn number 30, 'Jesus, stand among us' (verses 1 & 2)

1. Jesus, stand among us

At the meeting of our lives,

Be our sweet agreement

At the meeting of our eyes.

O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

2. So to you we're gathering

Out of each and every land,

Christ the love between us

At the joining of our hands;

O Jesus, we love you, so we gather here;

Join our hearts in unity and take away our fear.

© Graham Kendrick – Kingsway's Thankyou Music 1977

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we have come to worship you this morning, for you are the Source of love, the Creator of our universe and all life within it, yet from the earliest times, you have revealed 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 boundless love and grace by coming into our world as Jesus Christ, not only to bring good news in words and deeds of love, but to give his life at Calvary to redeem us from our sins. His resurrection broke the power of death, so we may have eternal life. Then, when he ascended to heaven, you sent your Holy Spirit to inspire, comfort and guide our discipleship. Amazing God, take away all 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 to 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 know 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, so we 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.

“So let us learn how to serve / And in our lives enthrone him, / Each other’s needs to prefer, / For it is Christ we’re serving.” Wonderful words by Graham Kendrick – written for ‘Spring Harvest’, (can you believe it?), 40 years ago! Hymn number 272, ‘The Servant King’.

**1. From heaven You came,
Helpless babe, entered our world,
Your glory veiled; not to be served
But to serve and give Your life
That we might live. Chorus:**

***This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow Him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.***

**2. There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load he chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
‘Yet not My will but Yours,’ He said. Chorus:**

**3. Come see His hands and His feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice ;
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered. Chorus:**

**4. So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone Him;
Each other’s needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we’re serving. Chorus:**

© Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

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’.

Lord of all, 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 in 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 they govern justly and mercifully and seek fairness for all-comers, for true peace springs from justice and mercy. 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, we grieve for countries afflicted by disasters resulting from climate change and for our part in humankind's failure to act as faithful stewards of the planet you gave us. The evidence is here before us: droughts and famine; unbearable heatwaves and wildfires; devastating floods, exceptionally powerful storms, depletion of resources and melting ice-caps. In the last few weeks we have seen the devastation and many deaths wrought by wildfires on Maui in Hawaii, in Canada and Europe. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles, by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather and so our descendants will inherit and habitable world.

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

Lord of shalom, we pray for the establishment of peace throughout the world and for the end of fighting particularly in Ukraine, Sudan and between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. Bless with success the work of peacemakers and everybody who works with victims of wars, terrorism, persecution and prejudice, for they are worthy to be called your sons and daughters.

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

God 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 play our part by offering 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, 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 be bold in taking the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

"Be our strength in hours of weakness, / In our wanderings be our guide; / Through endeavour, failure, danger, / Father, be thou at my side." Love Maria Willis wrote the words in 1856 and the hymn reflects some of the tension that existed in the USA just before the outbreak of the Civil War. Hymn number 518, 'Father, hear the prayer we offer,'

1. Father, hear the prayer we offer:

Not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength that we may ever
Live our lives courageously.

2. Not for ever in green pastures
Do we ask our way to be;
But the steep and rugged pathway
May we tread rejoicingly.

3. Not for ever by still waters
Would we idly rest and stay;
But would smite the living fountains
From the rocks along our way.

4. Be our strength in hours of weakness,
In our wanderings be our guide;
Through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.

© Love Maria Willis {1824 – 1908}

The Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 16 verses 21 to 28

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

Jesus turned and said to Peter,
"Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done. I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Amen.

We shall sing the hymn, 'Will you bear your cross for the kingdom's sake'

1. Will you bear your cross for the kingdom's sake

And accept the cost of serving?

Will you trust in Christ every step you take,

Though your prospects are unnerving? *Chorus:*

Will you bring good news at whatever cost

To this world of sin and sadness?

Will you seek the broken and the lost;

Let your words and deeds bring gladness?

2. Will you bear the scorn and the unbelief

Of the ones who won't receive you?

Will you persevere, overcome your grief

And let not your doubts deceive you? *Chorus:*

3. Will your love endure if the world turns sour,

Even though friends may reject you,

Will you still stand strong in the Spirit's power –

Let the love of God protect you? *Chorus:*

4. Will you bear your cross in the Saviour's name –

Lay down all you have before him?

Will you understand that both praise and shame

Show you worship and adore him? *Chorus:*

We shall take good news at whatever cost

To this world of sin and sadness.

We shall seek the broken and the lost;

Let our words and deeds bring gladness.

M. Rider 16th Aug. 2020 (To 'Have you heard God's voice?' StF 662) modified 20th Aug. 2023

Sermon: *"If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"* Mt. 16:24

I like Simon Peter because he was both enthusiastic and fallible – certainly as prone to gaffes as any of us. His discipleship was a little like fishing on the Sea of Galilee. Let me explain. The Sea of Galilee lies nearly 700 feet below the Mediterranean and is subject to strong winds that are channelled through the surrounding hills. As a result, it is subjected to sudden fierce squalls that create waves five or six metres high. At the time of Jesus, fishermen would have been used to seas as flat as a mill-pond, yet within minutes a squall could arise with raging torrents that threatened to swamp the small craft used by local fishermen. Peter's discipleship reflected this: one minute he was on the crest of a wave; the next he was in the trough! The incident in our reading was typical, for he'd had earned Jesus' praise when he declared Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One of God. Such a declaration of faith wouldn't have been difficult for Peter, because he had heard his master's teaching, witnessed Jesus' grasp of the Scriptures, his healings and his miracles.

Yet, soon afterwards, Jesus told his disciples that he would go to Jerusalem only for the Sanhedrin, the religious Establishment, to reject him. Worse still, he declared that he would be killed and be raised on the third day. Such talk must have seemed ridiculous to his followers, especially to Peter. After all, at that time, Jews expected the Messiah to lead an uprising that would sweep the Roman occupiers from the land, to restore the nation to the political and economic power enjoyed at the time of King David, before he compelled the people to observe a new covenant with the Lord. Peter and his friends would have thought God's Son couldn't be killed by mortal men – besides, neither God nor his angels would allow such a thing to happen – and as usual Peter was the one who voiced their objections. **"Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!"**

Jesus turned and spoke sternly to Peter: **"Get behind me, Satan!"** he said. **"You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."** He didn't mean that Peter was the devil, but that his objections contradicted God's plan for the salvation of all people. It took the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost for them to truly understand that mankind's salvation needed Jesus to die – as the one perfect sacrifice whose blood washes away all sins – but Peter and the disciples could not comprehend then, because they believed in strength of arms rather than the all-conquering power of **racham** or **agape** as Greeks call **boundless love**.

When Jesus continued, saying, **"If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"** they would have been shaken, for the victim of crucifixion died under a Deuteronomic curse, **"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."** Moreover, crucifixion is a terrible death – the victim often hung for up to seventy-two hours in indescribable agony until he died from

suffocation or exhaustion. For some of the disciples, the cost of discipleship was indeed death, but Christ was not demanding that his followers – including us – must perish on a cross. Unlike Islamic State, Christianity is not a death-cult. No, indeed, it is a LIFE-MOVEMENT. What Jesus asked of them and us is wholehearted commitment, whatever the cost – putting ourselves in God's hands and trusting his redemptive love – rather like the Covenant Prayer used by Methodists:

'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.'

Christ Jesus calls us to follow him, abandoning things the world holds dear, (materialism, power, fame), trusting in God the Father as Jesus himself did when he became incarnate, in Charles Wesley's words, **'He left his Father's throne above – so free, so infinite his grace – emptied himself of all but love, and bled for Adam's helpless race.'** Remember that before Christ let sinners like us nail him to the cross, it required a tremendous act of will, for he had agonised over his fate in the Garden of Gethsemane only hours before.

Do we possess the will-power and courage to answer our call to play a part in God's kingdom, by building-up our communities? The current high inflation, rising mortgage, energy and food prices **have shaken this country severely and many of us and our neighbours are experiencing serious ill-being.** Yet, if you listen to the news you will see many countries far worse off than ours, so we must not become so preoccupied with our own woes that we ignore our neighbours' plight. You may say in despair that many churches have lost members since the COVID19 epidemic and some have ceased to meet, so what chance have we got as latter-day disciples?

It is true the situation seems bleak, but if you think this nation's problems, let alone world problems, are too big for us to handle, remember that there is nothing impossible for God and he walks by our side in our discipleship. If we support our neighbours and the wider community by working together, we can and shall make a difference. Community support groups, foodbanks, well-being and job-clubs can help people who are really struggling and Church can provide this kind of support, if not as individuals, by offering funds or practical support and by pooling what we have to offer with others to make a bigger impact. We cannot guarantee that all our efforts will be successful, but it is far better to try than to throw up our hands in despair and do nothing. If we freely offer all we have and are to the Lord, we honour our covenant.

Remember, the word covenant has roots not just in agreement or contract but in shackles – not the shackles of prisoners or slaves but unbreakable chains that won't allow us to be torn from God. When he called us to proclaim the good news and baptize followers in his name, Jesus promised that he will be with us to the very end of the age – the chains of Christ's covenant hold us fast today, but we are free to choose whether or not to answer his invitation to follow, for we are his friends, not slaves and any service we give is done as a response to his love for us, rather than a necessary duty to try to earn that love.

My friends, will you brave the hostility of our increasingly secular and self-absorbed society which frequently rejects kingdom values? Will you speak up for justice for the poor and oppressed of the developing world as well as for people you know who are at risk of losing their jobs, or who are burdened by debt? Will you accept that might is not always right, for even our Lord's helplessness at Calvary was strong enough to

destroy Satan's power? Remember, God is in control, even when our world is in chaos. I am convinced that love will overcome hatred and good will defeat evil as long as we remain faithful to God's kingdom and its values! Will you take up your cross and play your part in God's mission of love to our world? Amen.

We shall close our worship with a hymn written by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Hymn number 673, 'Will you come and follow me'.

1. Will you come and follow me

If I but call your name?

Will you go where you don't know

And never be the same?

Will you let my love be shown,

Will you let my name be known,

Will you let my life be grown

In you, and you in me?

2. Will you leave yourself behind

If I but call your name?

Will you care for cruel and kind

And never be the same?

Will you risk the hostile stare

Should your life attract or scare,

Will you let me answer prayer

In you, and you in me?

3. Will you let the blinded see

If I but call your name?

Will you set the pris'ners free,

And never be the same?

Will you kiss the leper clean

And do such as this unseen,

And admit to what I mean

In you, and you in me?

4. Will you love the 'you' you hide

If I but call your name?

Will you quell the fear inside,

And never be the same?

Will you use the faith you've found

To reshape the world around

Through my sight and touch and sound / In you, and you in me?

5. Lord, your summons echoes true

When you but call my name.

Let me turn and follow you,

And never be the same.

In your company I'll go

Where your love and footsteps show.

Thus, I'll move and live and grow

In you, and you in me.

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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.