

A service for 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2020 (StF)

**Call to Worship: Psalm 118 verses 22 to 24**

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

*We echo the Psalmist's bidding to rejoice as we sing hymn number 152, 'This is the day', to a Fijian folk melody.*

**1. This is the day,  
This is the day that the Lord has made,  
That the Lord has made.**

**We will rejoice,  
We will rejoice and be glad in it,  
And be glad in it.  
This is the day that the Lord has made;  
We will rejoice and be glad in it.  
This is the day,  
This is the day that the Lord has made.**

**2. This is the day,  
This is the day when he rose again,  
When he rose again.**

**We will rejoice,  
We will rejoice and be glad in it,  
And be glad in it.  
This is the day when he rose again;  
We will rejoice and be glad in it.  
This is the day,  
This is the day when he rose again.**

**3. This is the day,  
This is the day when the Spirit came,  
When the Spirit came,**

**We will rejoice,  
We will rejoice and be glad in it,  
And be glad in it.  
This is the day when the Spirit came;  
We will rejoice and be glad in it.  
This is the day,  
This is the day when the Spirit came. *Anonymous (Fiji Island folk melody)***

**Let us turn to the Lord in prayer. In our prayer of adoration and thanksgiving, when I say 'Almighty God', please respond with 'all glory and praise are yours forever'.**

Lord of all, you are the Living Word who spoke our universe into being, who formed this world and all that lives upon it. It is you who created mankind and entrusted the stewardship of this world to our care.

**Almighty God all glory and praise are yours forever.**

Faithful God, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and provide our daily needs. You have granted us wisdom to make use of the resources this world offers and a conscience to discern between right and wrong. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

Almighty God **all glory and praise are yours forever.**

Gracious God, you know everything about us: our virtues and vices, our successes and our failures, our hopes and fears and yet you love us so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, so by his life and teaching, we might understand how you want us live. Through his crucifixion and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Almighty God **all glory and praise are yours forever.**

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled by your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in love, spirit and truth.

Almighty God **all glory and praise are yours forever. Amen.**

**In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Gracious God', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.**

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things we enjoy and experiences that have fulfilled us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we do. In Jesus' precious name, help us to amend our ways, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. May we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for our neighbours joyfully and faithfully, we may honour you always, in Jesus' beautiful name. Amen.

***Let us say the prayer our Lord 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.**

***Our second hymn was written by Colin Ferguson, a Scot who worked as a probation officer, then for family courts, contributing much to the establishment of mediation services and training for work as well as bereavement care.***

***He is an elder and licensed preacher in the United Reformed Church. We shall sing hymn number 629, 'God of my faith, I offer you my doubt'.***

**1. God of my faith, I offer you my doubt,  
For life at times seems far too dark for me,  
And my belief becomes more insecure,  
When worldly cares produce uncertainty.**

2. God of my hope, I offer you my fear,  
When I am scared by my anxiety,  
When all I hear is suffering and woe,  
In all my shadows you will walk with me.

3. God of my joy, I offer you my grief,  
When I sink down in sadness or despair,  
When in depression I cannot be touched,  
I pray in all my depths to find you there.

4. God of my love, I offer you my pain,  
When I'm alone and feel nobody cares,  
In aching age or in rejected youth,  
You bear my cross and dry my human tears.

5. God of my life, I offer you my dreams,  
Light in the darkness where I hide from view,  
Light in my faith, my hope, my joy and love,  
Light in my life and all my life in you.

© Colin Ferguson (born 1937)

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.***

God most gracious and holy, thank you for your boundless, undying love that has sustained us throughout lockdown and which we are confident will bring us through this time of trial. Help us to reveal the light of your love in our daily lives, so we can lighten some of the darkness that has enveloped the world by caring for neighbours both nearby and far away. Grant us all the spiritual resources we need to answer your call, but in circumstances where we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

Lord of all, remember in your goodness, this church, the other churches in our Circuit and, indeed, the World Church. Help your Church as it begins to open its buildings and as it plans for the ending of lockdown, for many are facing significant issues that have arisen during the past six months. Nevertheless, help us all to share the Good News, united in words and deeds, so we reveal Christ as the risen Lord and Saviour of the world.

Hear our prayer for schools and universities as they work their way through the difficulties that have arisen since the academic year has begun. Help those in authority take wise courses of action that help minimise the risk of infection and grant university students the wisdom and patience to bear current restrictions in hope that they will be able to enjoy some form of normality before long.

Lord of reconciliation and forgiveness, we pray for peace around the world where acts of war, terrorism and persecution cause so many deaths, so much destruction and despair. Inspire the leaders of the nations of his world to rule wisely and to seek justice and peace, rather than resorting to violence when they cannot have their way. Compassionate God, help resolve situations that seem hopeless and let your love overcome the hatred in human hearts.

Lord of shalom, or wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit. Let them feel your presence in their need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, throughout the treatment their time of trial.

Gracious God, reach out to people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, especially in these stressful times. Comfort them in their distress, reassure them when they are confused and let them feel loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, hear our prayer for neighbours who are lonely, afraid, overworked, those for whom lockdown has strained their relationship to breaking point, or people who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody who mourns the loss of a loved one, especially now. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will reach out to them. ....

Lord, we ask you help us to offer them practical support and friendship, although that is difficult at a time of social distancing. Hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and enduring peace.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies to protect their peoples until COVID19 is brought under control. We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe in their duties and help them to successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccine that works. Help us to patiently observe guidelines laid down by the Government, even though we may find them difficult and confusing. Dispel scepticism and reckless behaviour in parts of the country where tighter restrictions have been imposed, so that, by obeying the rules, the rate of infection is controlled and help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can find comfort in your saving grace.

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 Christ-centred lives but to boldly take the light of the gospel to a broken and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

**The first reading is the Epistle to the Philippians chapter 3 verses 4b to 14**

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. Amen.

*We shall sing a hymn written in 1993 by Graham Kendrick and based on today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians.*

*'But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things'. Let us sing, number 489, 'All I once held dear'*

**1. All I once held dear,  
Built my life upon,  
All this world reveres,  
And wars to own,  
All I once thought gain  
I have counted loss,  
Spent and worthless now,  
Compared to this: *Chorus*  
*Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,  
There is no greater thing.  
You're my all, you're the best,  
You're my joy, my righteousness,  
And I love you, Lord.***

**2. Now my heart's desire  
Is to know you more,  
To be found in you  
And known as yours;  
To possess by faith  
What I could not earn,  
All-surpassing gift / Of righteousness. *Chorus***

**3. Oh, to know the power  
Of your risen life,  
And to know you in  
Your sufferings;  
To become like you  
In your death, my Lord,  
So with you to live  
And never die! *Chorus***

© *Graham Kendrick (born 1950)*

### **Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 21 verses 33 to 46**

Jesus said,

"Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.

When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them.

'They will respect my son,' he said.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?

“He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Jesus said to them,

“Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’? Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. Amen.

*There are times when I become as grumpy as Victor Meldrew – usually when some ill-informed person criticises hymns like “Onward Christian soldiers”, or our next hymn as ‘too militaristic’. Anybody acquainted with the letters of Paul will see that the only battle being advocated is against evil, not against fellow human beings. Its author, Revd. John Monsell wrote this of hymn-singing, ‘Most of us are too distant and reserved’ .... ‘We sing not as if our hearts were on fire with the divine flame of love and joy as we should hymn Him who is chief in the courts of heaven and altogether lovely’ ... ‘We sing, not as we should sing to He who is Chief among the ten thousand, the Altogether Lovely.’ I hope we prove him wrong as we sing hymn number 634, ‘Fight the good fight with all your might,’*

**1. Fight the good fight with all your might;**

**Christ is thy strength, and Christ your right;**

**Lay hold on life, and it shall be**

**Your joy and crown eternally.**

**2. Run the straight race through God’s good grace,**

**Lift up your eyes, and seek his face;**

**Life with its way before you lies;**

**Christ is the path, and Christ the prize.**

**3. Cast care aside; upon your guide**

**Lean, and his mercy will provide;**

**Lean, and the trusting soul shall prove**

**Christ is its life, and Christ its love.**

**4. Faint not nor fear, his arm is near;**

**He changes not, and you are dear;**

**Only believe, and prove it true**

**That Christ is all in all to you.**

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**Sermon:** “The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all.” Mtt 21:42  
It is very easy to accept the parable of the tenants in the vineyard as a condemnation of the chief priests and Pharisees, who were rejecting Jesus’ Good News, because their forefathers had also rejected God’s call to be his holy people. However, this teaching is as relevant in the Twenty-First Century as it was in the First. Let us begin by looking at the points Jesus was making in the parable.

He based his parable upon the first Isaiah’s, “Song of the Vineyard”, in which the prophet described how hard a friend worked upon his vineyard, digging the soil, removing the stones, planting only the finest vines, building a watch tower to protect the vineyard and, finally, digging a pit in which the ripe grapes could be pressed to make fine wine. Alas, his efforts were in vain, for the vines only produced sour grapes. As a result, the owner abandoned it and cursed it. Isaiah, of course, was warning Judeans of

the disaster that was imminent – defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians – because of the country’s failure to honour its covenant with God. The song’s imagery pointed out how much God had invested in his chosen people, giving them the promised land, delivering them from their enemies, providing all they needed to prosper and only requiring the people faithfully honour the covenant he had made with them. Yet Isaiah decried their faithlessness: **‘Israel is the vineyard of the Lord Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted. He expected them to do what was good, but instead they committed murder. He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice.’** The victims were not Gentiles, but their own poor, who the wealthy oppressed and even cheated them of their land.

Notice how Jesus used Isaiah’s imagery, then developed it to show how the vineyard owner’s slaves were abused, beaten, even killed, by the rebellious tenants. The slaves represented the prophets, some of whom were abused as badly as, or even worse than Jeremiah, who was beaten, set in the stocks and later thrown into a mud-filled cistern. The prophets’ ‘offence’ was to call the Jews to repentance, which means doing more than merely saying they were sorry. The prophets’ cry of, **‘SHUB’**, means to return to God, to turn 180 degrees from sin, back towards the Lord. Repentance means turning away from sin and to observe the covenant made with the Lord.

Jesus continued by relating how the vineyard owner sent his son to collect what was owed by the tenants, generously attributing the mistreatment of the slaves to the tenants’ failure to recognise from whom they had been sent and expecting them to respect the son for who he was. However, instead, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him, so they might seize his inheritance. In other words, Christ spoke of his own passion and death at Calvary as a direct, wilful act of the Jewish Establishment, which defied God and denied him what was owed: obedience, love and faith.

By quoting **Psalm 118**, **“The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all,”** Jesus warned the chief priests and Pharisees of the terrible mistake they were about to make, saying that, as they had failed to bear **‘proper fruits’**, God was going to open his kingdom to people who would obey him. Had it not been for their fear of the Passover crowds, Christ’s enemies would have arrested him then and there, but they chose to bide their time. They were too proud and thought they had too much to lose to repent and seek God’s ways.

Do we really appreciate how much God has done for us – and is still doing? Think of this world, of its intricate beauty, its ability to sustain life, despite mankind’s exploitation and pollution of its resources. Consider how the Lord reaches out to draw us into a close relationship with him; how when our forefathers failed to listen to the prophets, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to share our lives, to die to redeem us from sin and to be raised from death to offer us new life at the end of our mortal lives. He lives in us as the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and guides us when we let him. Oh yes, as Isaac Watts expressed it, **‘Were the whole realm of nature mine, / That were an offering far too small; / Love, so amazing, so divine, / Demands my soul, my life, my all.’**

Our reading challenges us to question how we use our gifts from God. Do our lives honour Jesus? Do our actions match our words, or are we merely lip-service Christians? Do we honour Christ’s Greatest Commandment? **Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’** The second is this: **‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’**

COVID 19 has changed – and is still changing – the world. Its effects are far-reaching, not just in the United Kingdom. Many people, here and abroad are experiencing heart-breaking difficulties: loss of work; poverty; broken health arising from long-lasting coronavirus issues; failed relationships; anxiety and depression; isolation and a sense of powerlessness. All of these need to be addressed and though we know we can't put everything right on our own, we need to explore ways where we can help, however small a part we can play – and then act as individuals or, better still as a church to heal some of the brokenness around us.

Putting matters right in our country is such a challenge that we may be tempted to forget the Developing World. I am not a fan of Boris Johnson, but I am pleased that he has offered funds to help distribute vaccines against coronavirus to poor nations, assuming that effective vaccines are developed, for the northern hemisphere must not have a monopoly of life-saving resources. It is true that the financial crisis in 2008 and subsequent austerity programmes have made it difficult to honour the Millennium Pledge and COVID 19 is adding to the difficulties, but it ought not to be a permanent excuse to abandon our poorer brothers and sisters. After all, the legacies of our failure will be: most children in the Developing Nations will receive little or no education; many will begin work at five or six years old; the sick won't be able to afford to see a doctor, let alone buy medicines and many won't even have one meal a day. Since 1990, 2.6 billion people have gained access to an improved source of drinking water. Even today, 663 million people – 1 in 10 – still drink water from unprotected sources. A Christian-based charity, **Tearfund**, supports the UN-led Sustainable Development Goals, which speak of everyone having access to safe water by 2030. At the beginning of the Millennium, Tearfund reported that more than 200000 children were dying every week because they had neither access to clean water nor proper sanitation, yet **if everybody in Europe and North America gave \$1, or 60p**, then nearly everyone in Developing World could have both clean water and sanitation provided. **Incidentally, if I have preached for twenty minutes, four hundred such children will have perished. If we turn our back on such suffering, are we any better than the tenants in the vineyard, who refused to honour the owner's son? Amen.**

*Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in response to a diocesan challenge during 1961 and it is a challenge to all Christians. Let us raise our voices as we sing hymn number 418, 'We have a gospel to proclaim,'*

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,  
Good news for all throughout the earth;  
The gospel of a Saviour's name:  
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –  
Not in a royal house or hall,  
But in a stable, dark and dim,  
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:  
Hated by those he came to save,  
In lonely suffering on the cross,  
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;  
Empty the tomb, for he was free.  
He broke the power of death and hell / That we might share his victory.**



**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,  
By all creation glorified.  
He sends his Spirit on his church  
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:  
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.  
This gospel message we proclaim:  
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

© *Edward J. Burns (1938 –)*

***Benediction***

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all now and forever more. Amen.