

A service for 4th October, 2026 (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 'blessed be your name'.

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. We rejoice in the beauty and wonders of creation.

Almighty God.....blessed be your name.

Faithful God, in your compassion you 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.....blessed be your name.

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 death and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Almighty God.....**blessed be your name.**

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. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive 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.

Lord, whilst you are holy, we confess that we are deeply-flawed. We confess that we often don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we should. In Jesus' precious name, help us to change our ways, and pardon us for the sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have forgiven us. From now on 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 in 1974 by Bryn Rees, a Congregational Minister who served mainly in Eastern and South Eastern England. The melody 'Tetherdown' was composed specifically for this hymn by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister. However, there are three other settings which makes it an organist's nightmare in case he or she plays the 'wrong tune'. We shall sing 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}

***In our prayers of intercession we pray for the needs of ourselves and others.
When I say ‘Lord, in your mercy’, please respond with, ‘Hear our prayer’.***

Lord of all, thank you for this beautiful planet upon which we live, for it ought to allow everybody to live in the abundance of your creation. However, we know the earth has been abused by human foolishness, greed and, worst of all, our indifference. The effects of climate change are becoming abundantly clear, with series of heatwaves and drought, melting ice caps and severe floods. Show us how to use resources thoughtfully and carefully, so we may play our part in helping the world recover from the damage we have done over several centuries. Help us preserve a habitable world for future generations.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,**‘Hear our prayer’.**

Loving Lord and Prince of Peace, we ask you to inspire leaders of nations to turn away from using violence when they can’t have their own way and bid them seek justice and mercy for those they govern. We ask for swift and just conclusions to wars that are being waged at present, especially in the Holy Land, Ukraine, Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Congo, Sudan and Somalia. In grief, we remember all victims of conflicts, discrimination, injustice and violence, praying that they find peace, safety, refuge and security, in order to rebuild their lives.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,**‘Hear our prayer’.**

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we remember people who are sick, lonely, fearful, troubled and broken in our community, for those whose lives are coming to an end and everybody who mourns the loss of loved-ones. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are especially concerned, confident that you already know their needs and will reach out to them.....
Help us to offer them practical support and friendship, but also enfold them in your merciful arms, that they may find healing, hope, comfort and an enduring peace.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,**‘Hear our prayer’.**

Almighty God, we pray for this church, churches in local Circuits and the World Church, that we may serve you in Spirit, love and truth. Unite us all in mission, so we help build up your kingdom with acts of grace and goodness. May we find ways of bringing good news to a world that dearly needs it.

‘Lord, in your mercy’,**‘Hear our prayer’.**

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe and fill our hearts to overflowing with your love. Then help us share it freely with both friends and strangers, in Jesus’ wonderful name. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Revd. Jan Berry, originally a Baptist Pastor but now a minister in the URC, at the request of a fellow minister for a hymn that dealt with Herod’s massacre of the innocents and was intended for Epiphany and Advent. However, it also can be a metaphor for our journey through the uncertainties and pain we face in our life-journey and for reassurance and healing offered by Jesus. Although Paul Leddington-Wright has composed a new

melody for the hymn, I prefer it sing to “Epiphany” which was its original setting – we can concentrate on Revd/ Berry’s words. We shall sing hymn number 625, ‘Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming’.

**1. Deep in the darkness a starlight is gleaming,
Calling us out from the safety of home.**

**God of the questions, the mystery of dreaming,
Lighten our journey into the unknown.**

**2. Out of the darkness the voices are crying,
Terror and fear screaming loud in the night.**

**God of the hurting, of innocence dying,
Fire us with anger to struggle for right.**

**3. Still in the darkness we search for your healing,
Hoping for meaning to comfort our fear.**

**God of the silence, of unspoken feeling,
Teach us the wisdom to make your truth clear.**

**4. On through the darkness we follow your leading,
Searching for joy and a refuge to stay.**

**God of our longing, the bliss we are seeking,
Journey with us to the brightness of day.**

© Jan Berry (Born 1953)

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.

The writer of our penultimate hymn, Bernadette Farrell, is a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK. Although she is a Roman Catholic, her hymns are ecumenical and this hymn calls for the Lord to

lighten our darkness. 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---}

Sermon: *"The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all."* Mt 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, so 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 to 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.' It is worth noting the victims were not Gentiles, but their own poor, who the wealthy oppressed and even cheated them of their land.

Notice how Jesus developed Isaiah's imagery 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. Their cry of, '**SHUB**', means to return to God, to turn 180 degrees from sin, back towards the Lord turning from the path to judgment and condemnation to one leading to the Lord's salvation.

Jesus continued by relating how the vineyard owner then sent his son to collect what was owed by the tenants, generously attributing their mistreatment of the slaves to the tenants' failure to recognise from whom they had been sent and expecting them to respect his son. 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 **Psalms 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.

This reading challenges us, too. 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 Christ shared our lives, died to redeem us from sin and was raised to offer us new life at the end of our mortal span. He lives in us as the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and guides us. 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.**'

We are challenged 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.**'

We are living not only with the consequences of wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, but with the legacy of the COVID19 pandemic, an unholy trinity that have had adverse economic, social and spiritual effects on society at all levels. Youth unemployment, disengagement and vulnerability, the NHS and care systems, lack of housing and political polarization are far beyond political quick-fixes and need society as a whole to effect change.

We can play our part by honouring the Great Commandment, answering Christ's call to care for our neighbours, whether by supporting organisations and agencies like

Citizens Advice Bureau, charity shops, or foodbanks, or the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can, or Christian Aid. Just as importantly, we can keep an eye on neighbours, young and old, who are struggling. A cup of tea, a listening ear and a chat can be enough to lighten their mood. Whilst it may not be earth-shaking in the big scheme of things, it fulfils what is asked of us. **May we recognize Christ's redeeming grace to us and respond generously by serving him faithfully and joyfully. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in response to a Blackburn 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.**

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Benediction

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