

A service for 5th September, 2021. (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 100

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations. Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn set to ‘Abbots Leigh’, but “Singing the Faith” uses Henry Smart’s ‘Bethany’. Hymn number 25, ‘God is here! As we his people’.

1. God is here! As we his people

Meet to offer praise and prayer,

May we find in fuller measure

What it is in Christ we share.

Here, as in the world around us,

All our varied skills and arts

Wait the coming of the Spirit

Into open minds and hearts.

2. Here are symbols to remind us

Of our lifelong need of grace;

Here are table, font and pulpit;

Here the cross has central place.

Here in honesty of preaching,

Here in silence, as in speech,

Here in newness and renewal,

God the Spirit comes to each.

3. Here our children find a welcome

In the Shepherd’s flock and fold:

Here as bread and wine are taken,

Christ sustains us, as of old.

Here the servants of the Servant

Seek in worship to explore

What it means in daily living

To believe and to adore.

4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,

In an age of change and doubt,

Keep us faithful to the gospel,

Help us work your purpose out.

Here, in this day’s dedication,

All we have to give, receive:

**We, who cannot live without you,
We adore you! We believe!**

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Let us pray.

Almighty God, author of all life throughout the universe, we come to worship you today with reverence and joy, as we seek a greater understanding and appreciation of both your saving grace and purpose for us. Your faithful love sustains us, day by day and the beauty, power and complexity of our world remind us of your wisdom and holiness. We rejoice that, despite your infinite powers, you care for sinful human beings so much that you took human form, as Christ Jesus, to reveal your true nature through his healings, miracles and teaching. We believe his death and resurrection have redeemed us from enslavement to sin and death. Therefore, amazing God, accept our worship today: remove all anxieties and distractions, so we may celebrate your holiness and glory.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for all the blessings that we receive from you: the good things we enjoy, for people who have guided, inspired and loved us, besides all the experiences and opportunities that have enriched our days. Merciful Lord, your grace and goodness humble us, for we know we fail to live as you call us to. In grief we confess we don't love others as we love ourselves and we are sometimes half-hearted in our service to you, our Lord. Gracious God, help us to change our ways and in Jesus' name forgive us both for the sins we have committed and for the opportunities to do good that we have spurned.

Gracious God, we believe you hear and answer our prayers. We believe you have forgiven us, so we ask you to send us forth in the power of the Holy Spirit, so we can take Good News to the world in our words and deeds in the glorious name of Jesus, our master and friend. 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 by Revd. Bryn Rees in 1974. He was the Minister at Tetherdown URC, Muswell Hill, London at the time and his organist, Gerald Barnes composed one of four melodies for it which, naturally, is called "Tetherdown"! 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}**

We come to our prayers of intercession. Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, although you have set us upon a beautiful planet and meet our daily needs the news all too often reminds us about the world's brokenness, much of which is the result our failure to live as you call us to, by caring for one another, co-existing in peace and acting as responsible stewards of the environment. Lord, help us to support and comfort neighbours who are troubled or in need, so we may act as Jesus would act, but there are so many situations where we feel helpless. In our despair we pray that you will reach out to people who have the power and influence to heal and restore to wholeness all our greed, cruelty, pride, foolishness, selfishness and indifference has harmed.

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 remember, too, Haitians affected by the latest earthquake, followed by a severe storm. We offer our prayer for all these 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 of shalom, of peace and wellbeing, we pray for peace in a world defiled by conflicts, persecution, terrorism and prejudice. Hear our prayer for Afghanistan, as allied troops have left and the population faces Taliban rule once more. The situation is so grave that it is difficult to know what to pray for, other than those who have been evacuated may find safe refuge and compassionate treatment from their hosts. O loving Lord, guide national leaders to seek justice and mercy in their dealings, so peace may flow like a healing river and let your peace begin with us, so our lives reflect what we ask for the world.

Lord, we pray for people who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, that they will not only receive the care and support they need to be healed, but may experience your presence alongside them in their time of need. We remember, too, all who are in any kind of need or trouble and, in particular, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned.
Lord, help us to offer them both friendship and practical support, but embrace them with your love, so they may be blessed with courage, hope, healing and enduring peace.

Gracious God, we continue to ask your blessing upon everybody who has been working for our wellbeing during this crisis, especially members of the NHS, scientists, carers and key-workers. Dearest Lord, grant them success in their work and keep them safe.

Holy Spirit, Breath of God, kindle the faith of all churches, not only our church, but churches throughout the world, so that, as we begin to emerge from the shadow of COVID19, we may be agents of healing and hope. Bless us at the beginning of the new

Church year and grant us the vision to recognize the needs of neighbours afflicted by the past nineteen months of the pandemic and the wisdom and courage to reach out and rectify at least some of the harm they have suffered.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us our families and our friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us proclaim good news, in our daily lives by sharing the love you give us in such abundance with all-comers, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

In 1965, Sydney Carter wrote a hymn, based on Jesus teaching in Matthew chapter 25 verses 44 and 45. It caught the mood of the time and was often sung by folk singers as a protest song. I believe one of the first times I heard it sung was by the Spinners at Birmingham Town Hall about half a century ago. We close our worship with hymn number 256, 'When I needed a neighbour,'

1. When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a neighbour, were you there? Chorus:

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
Were you there?*

2. I was hungry and thirsty, were you there, were you there?

I was hungry and thirsty, were you there? Chorus:

3. I was cold, I was naked, were you there, were you there?

I was cold, I was naked, were you there? Chorus:

4. When I needed a shelter, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a shelter, were you there? Chorus:

5. When I needed a healer, were you there, were you there?

When I needed a healer, were you there? Chorus:

6. Wherever you travel, I'll be there, I'll be there,

Wherever you travel, I'll be there, Chorus:

*And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter,
I'll be there?*

© Sydney Carter {1915 -2004}

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 7 verses 24 to 37

Jesus left that place and went to the vicinity of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know it; yet he could not keep his presence secret. In fact, as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an evil spirit came and fell at his feet. The woman was a Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia. She begged Jesus to drive the demon out of her daughter.

"First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

Then he told her,

"For such a reply, you may go; the demon has left your daughter." She went home and found her child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

Then Jesus left the vicinity of Tyre and went through Sidon, down to the Sea of Galilee and into the region of the Decapolis. There some people brought to him a man who was deaf and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man.

After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him,

"Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly. Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak." Amen.

Sermon: "Yes, Lord; yet even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Mark 7:28
On 28th August, 55 years ago, Revd. Martin Luther King began a speech at a rally in Washington DC: "I have a dream I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the sort of persons they are. I have a dream that, one day all God's children, black, white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the black people's old song, 'Free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty, we are free at last!'" Those words virtually sealed his fate, for although he campaigned for peaceful change in the United States, the very fact that he opposed discrimination made him a marked man. In Memphis during 1968, he was shot and murdered, aged only 39. However, change has taken place because of his commitment to seek just treatment for all by peaceful methods.

Although Jesus had sought privacy and peace, almost as soon as he and his disciples arrived in the region of Tyre and Sidon, they were accosted by a Canaanite woman, who fell at Jesus' feet and implored him to drive out an evil spirit from her daughter. To us in the Twenty-first Century, this would seem to be a perfectly reasonable thing to have done, but by doing so, the woman broke a number of taboos, as far as First Century Jews were concerned: no Jew would accept being spoken to by a male or female Canaanite in such circumstances, for they were traditional enemies of the Jews, their ancestors having worshipped Baal, therefore being beyond the pale. Moreover, no Hebrew woman would have dared address a strange man in public, let alone a holy man, or prophet, as Jesus was considered.

In today's society Jesus' response would probably have been branded 'racist' by our Media. **"Let us first feed the children. It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."** However, before we make the same mistake, let us look at the word used by Mark which has been translated as 'dogs' – most certainly an insulting term! I feel confident that his eyes sparkled as he uttered a response that she could have expected from an orthodox Jew, for Jesus used the Greek word **kunaron** which means '**puppies**', not '**kuon**' or '**dog**', and would have been considered provocative, rather than insulting. Jesus was testing the depth of the woman's faith and her answer delighted him.

"Sir," she said, **"even the dogs under the table eat the children's leftovers."** Her answer was humble, but witty, for she had realised that Jesus had been satirising the traditional Jewish approach to Gentiles, a tradition that had developed after the return from exile in Babylon under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah. Jews had not always held such negative views, for, if we go back to the time when the Torah was given to Israel, these words from Deuteronomy express the true wishes of God: 'He defends the cause of

the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt.' Jesus was clearly delighted by her answer, praised her faith, cured her daughter and certainly left us in no doubt that his Good News is for everyone!

This story challenges us especially at this time, when our society seems more divided into **'us and them'** than ever. Consider the polarization of our country during Brexit; claims of anti-semitism and islamophobia within the UK's two main political parties and negative views about asylum-seekers and refugees in the Media. Jesus did not treat the Canaanite woman as a member of a despised group of foreigners, but as an individual with a profound need to be helped. He cast off traditional attitudes, which his followers had expected him to observe, offering grace and mercy rather than bitter rejection. Here was the real life version of the parable of the Good Samaritan with the Jew showing compassion to the Gentile, rather than vice versa.

The passage reminds us that God loves everyone, irrespective of colour, creed, or customs, not just a chosen few. Jesus lived, was crucified and was raised for all people, not just the Jews. We must avoid thinking ourselves in some way superior to others, writing off people as 'hopeless cases'. Instead, we are called to treat them compassionately, as Jesus did with the Canaanite woman.

In 1946, Dr. Ludwigg Guttman, working at Stoke Mandeville Hospital reacted against the public attitude to patients who were confined to wheelchairs, especially following spinal injuries, many of which were sustained during the Second World War. He saw how many had been written-off as hopeless cases and packed off to nursing homes to die. He was determined to change public prejudices and the lives of his patients, so he organized a wheelchair archery and field sports competition in 1948 – the year of the first London Olympics – using the Press to publicize it and overcoming strong objections from the Hospital Board. The competition was a great success, so by the 1960s it had grown into what was called the Paralympics. During the last nine years since the 2012 Paralympics in London, how many of us have continued to admire the skills and athleticism of competitors? The Paralympics ought to teach us that all of us have value however different we may be from what is considered 'normal': all of us have potential to achieve great things, even if we have extra obstacles to overcome. The paralympians don't want our pity, nor to be labelled as brave: they just want us to recognize their achievements – and to show that disabilities are not an excuse for anybody to be written off as 'hopeless'.

Similarly, we shouldn't rush to condemn people whose faith, colour, gender, sexuality or lifestyles differ from ours. After all, if we regard all people as being made in God's image, it is easier to care for them. In addition, if we feel the onset of **'APPEAL FATIGUE'** at yet another crisis in developing world, or feel intolerant when we consider the refugee situation in Europe, think how many times we've had to appeal for God's help and forgiveness: it's as well he doesn't suffer from 'appeal fatigue', or intolerance, isn't it! Through Christ Jesus, God extended his loving-kindness to all people and as followers, we're challenged to follow his example, remembering that in Christ's heart there are no 'dogs' except the four-legged variety. Amen.

We conclude our worship as we sing 'For all Christ died; for all was raised –'

**1. For all Christ died; for all was raised –
To all he offers hope:**

**Then let our Saviour's name be praised;
All come within his scope.**

**2. For all Christ came: the lame; the blind;
The fallen and deranged:
He healed them – body, soul and mind,
Their social standing changed.**

**3. To all Christ offers life again;
He gave his life for all.
For all he bore the shame and pain –
Atoned for sins of all.**

**4. Through faith the Spirit warms our heart,
Empowers our words and deeds.
Christ calls us all to play our part
And meet our neighbours' needs.**

**5. To all Christ calls, for if we choose
To follow where he leads –
Then we'll be bearers of Good News
In speech and gracious deeds.**

*M. Rider 29th March, 2009 - @ Amblecote Wordsley a.m. (to 'St. Magnus' HP2 /StF 312,
or 'St. Fulbert' HP823/ StF 769) Modified 24th August, 2021 – John Wesley's 'All may be saved*

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.