

A service for 6th April, 2022 Passiontide (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 126 verses 4 to 6

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. They who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written in 1979 to celebrate the bi-centenary of John Wesley's preaching in Paradise Square, Sheffield. The words and melody of this one were composed during a train journey between London and Chesterfield and it was inspired by the opening of the 1933 "Methodist Hymn Book", which reads 'Methodism was born in song. Charles Wesley wrote the first hymns of the Evangelical Revival during the great Whitsuntide of 1738 when his brother and he were "filled with the Spirit," and from that time onwards the Methodists have never ceased to sing.' The author, Revd. Brian Hoare was New Testament Tutor at Cliff College and in 1979 he was serving as a member of the main committee that created "Hymns and Psalms". We shall sing hymn number 21, 'Born in song'.

1. Born in song!

God's people have always been singing.

Born in song!

Hearts and voices raised.

So today we worship together;

God alone is worthy to be praised.

2. Praise to God!

For he is the one who has made us.

Praise to God!

We his image bear.

Heaven and earth are full of his glory;

Let creation praise him everywhere.

3. Christ is King!

He left all the glory of heaven.

Christ is King!

Born to share in our pain;

Crucified, for sinners atoning,

Risen, exalted, soon to come again.

4. Sing the song!

God's Spirit is poured out among us.

Sing the song!

He has made us anew.

Every member part of the Body;

Given his power, his will to seek and do.

5. Tell the world!

All power to Jesus is given.

Tell the world!

He is with us always.

Spread the word, that all may receive him;

Every tongue confess and sing his praise.

**6. Then the end!
Christ Jesus shall reign in his glory.
Then the end
Of all earthly days.
Yet above the song will continue;
All his people still shall sing his praise.**

© *Brian Hoare (born 1935)*

Let us come to the Lord in Prayer.

Almighty God, we come to worship you today in awe and humility, for you created this universe and all life within it. Your wisdom and power are beyond our comprehension for you have established ecosystems that maintain life and have tried to draw us close to you as your earthly children, despite our sinful natures. As we travel through Lent, we revisit the story of Jesus' passion, crucifixion and resurrection in amazement at your grace. The very thought that your Son should take our mortal form, not only to show us by words and deeds of grace how you want us to live, but to become the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world. Through his death and resurrection Christ Jesus broke the power of sin and death, offering us everlasting life.

Amazing God, thank you for the many blessings we have received from you throughout our lives, for friends and families, work and rest, our homes and food, the experiences, opportunities and challenges that have added lustre to our lives.

However, merciful Lord, we confess that we don't deserve any blessing, for we have failed to love others as we love ourselves and we are not always wholehearted when we serve you. As we recall the wrong we have done and the good we have neglected to do, we turn from them towards the path of righteousness, asking you to forgive us in the name of Christ our Saviour, who said that when we truly repent you will take away our sins and remember them no more.

Heavenly Father, we believe you hear and answer our prayers, offering us pardon, rather than condemnation. Help us to live as you want us to by helping our neighbours and revealing Christ's good news in our words and actions for as long as we live. Amen.

We shall say the Lord's Prayer.

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.

Graham Kendrick wrote our next hymn for Spring Harvest in 1984 after much research into the concept of the God, who created and loves everything, taking human form, becoming the Suffering Servant prophesied by Isaiah.

Surely, few descriptions of the passion have been written with greater poignancy than the third verse,

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

We shall sing hymn number 272, 'From heaven you came, helpless babe'.

**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 – (born 1950)

We come now to our prayers of intercession for people nearby and far away
Heavenly Father, although we have been blessed by living on this achingly beautiful planet, we grieve about the brokenness we see here and abroad, much of which is the result of human greed, spite, foolishness and indifference to our neighbours' needs. In response to your love for us, we want to play what part we can in making the world a better place, but we recognize that our own powers are limited and confess that often many complex issues threaten to overwhelm us. However, we are not afraid to ask you to reach out to inspire people with more ability, power and influence than we possess; people who can heal the suffering we see around us, for we know that to you all things are possible.

Lord of the world, we bring to you our anxieties and grief about the wars in Ukraine and the Holy Land and civil conflicts in Syria, Congo, Sudan and Somalia, for the destruction, suffering and death that result from mankind's inability to love our neighbours. Lord, we pray for President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine in their peril and distress, particularly after the meeting with President Trump and the withdrawal of American support. Remember the people in Gaza and Lebanon, following the resumption of hostilities with Israel. Lord, we ask for a swift, just end to and for a humane resolution to all these conflicts. Guide the leaders of the nations to govern with compassion and justice, to learn to negotiate and compromise when disputes arise, so that lasting peace is established on earth.

Remember, in your mercy our neighbours in Myanmar, Thailand and China, who were stricken by a powerful earthquake last week and for victims of global warming. Forgive us for our failure to be good stewards of the world and teach us to help play our part in reducing the harm we are doing the planet, so we may pass on a healthier world to forthcoming generations.

Jesus came as Lord of wholeness and wellbeing, so we ask you to hear our prayer for people in our community who are struggling with bodily, mental or spiritual health issues, for those who are brought low by loneliness, trouble, or need and for everybody who is mourning the loss of somebody dear to them. In a time of silence, we bring to

mind those who are in special need of your care and, 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 as well as sympathy, but may the warmth of your love enfold them to grant them healing, courage, comfort, hope and transcending peace.

Holy God, we pray for our church, other churches in our Circuit and the World Church, too. Help us learn new, effective ways of meeting the needs of our communities and to reflect the goodness and grace of Jesus by serving him with united, faithful hearts in words and deeds of love.

Abba, Heavenly Father, bless us, our friends and our families. Keep us safe in your care and help us to share the abundance of your love with our neighbours, both friends and strangers, so that our lives bring you honour through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Graham Kendrick in 1993 and is largely based on Philippians chapter 3. We shall sing hymn 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 pow'r
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*
*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.
Love you, Lord,
Love you Lord.*

© Graham Kendrick

Our Gospel reading is John chapter 12 verses 1 to 8

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honour. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages." He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it. "Leave her alone," Jesus replied. "It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me." Amen.

Sermon: *"It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial." John 12:7*

Lazarus, Mary and Martha were friends and supporters of Jesus. It is clear that Jesus was used to receiving hospitality at their home which was two miles south of Jerusalem, for our Lord was very close to them. Today's reading is set soon after Jesus had raised Lazarus after his body had lain in the tomb for four days, long enough for decomposition to have begun, so it was not a simple case of resuscitation. During the raising of Lazarus, Martha had declared Jesus was the Messiah and the sisters' despair over the death of their brother was only matched by their ecstasy when he was restored to life. Six days before his Last Supper, Jesus and his disciples were staying at Lazarus' home in Bethany. Martha served the meal, while Mary decided to show her reverence and love for our Lord. She broke the seal on an alabaster jar of nard, an expensive, fragrant oil used only on special occasions, before pouring the nard over Jesus' feet and dried them with her hair, rather than a towel, as a sign of humility. Clearly, John was present, for he not only described how the whole house was filled with the oil's fragrance, but was there to hear Judas Iscariot's indignant criticism of Mary's extravagant gesture.

Judas Iscariot probably voiced the feelings of other disciples when he rebuked Mary for making such a lavish demonstration of her devotion: after all, a pint of nard was worth three hundred denarii, a man's annual wages. Surely, he argued, had it been sold, the nard could have benefited the poor and, irrespective of John's claims that Judas intended to siphon off some of the funds, some of those present might have agreed with him. Jesus, however, defended Mary of Bethany's action: **"Leave her alone! Let her keep what she has for the day of my burial. You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me."** Evidently, Mary had not used all the ointment, but Jesus once more told his listeners that he would soon suffer and die, so that the remaining nard could be employed then.

The sentence, **"You will always have poor people with you, but you will not always have me"**, is not intended to be a divine endorsement of poverty, nor a defence of the status quo in society. Instead, it is a recognition that, as there are many and varied causes of poverty, his followers would have plenty of opportunities to help the poor, but

they were running out of time to demonstrate their love for him in his human form, as Mary had just done – **another pointer to his imminent passion.**

A significant feature is Mary's profound sense that Jesus was going to die, whilst everybody else was blithely unaware, although Jesus had forecast his passion and death for some time. Were the disciples blinded to what was going to happen within a week because they were convinced that they were facing glory and triumph as they entered Jerusalem next day? – the hosannas and palm leaves would have reinforced their Messianic expectations. Was Lazarus so absorbed by his resurrection from the tomb that he could not believe his friend, Jesus, could suffer such a fate? Was Martha too preoccupied with being a good hostess to see the writing on the wall? Did Mary break open the seal on the jar of nard to try to make everyone else see what was going to occur? Almost certainly she wanted to tell Jesus in her own way that she was totally devoted to him.

Many years ago, my wife and I used to buy flowers from a stall in West Bromwich outdoor market, so we got to know the stallholders very well. A week before Mothering Sunday, one of the stallholders warned gloomily that the price of flowers would increase dramatically and he anticipated that, as a result, he and his wife would sell fewer flowers. However, whilst his prediction of price-rises was correct, my wife and I were astounded to see the stall almost besieged by shoppers on the eve of Mothering Sunday. As we approached, the stallholder's wife waved cheerily to us and pointed to a sign attached to the awning: **"Better to buy flowers for the living to enjoy, than to buy them for their funeral."** The message clearly made its point on West Bromwichians!

As latter-day disciples, do we offer all that we have and are to Christ Jesus, not only in material resources, but also in terms of time and care? Are we like Judas, not as betrayers, but inasmuch that we hold something back for ourselves – 'for a rainy day'? How many of us fail to use our talents and time in serving Jesus, even though we hear his call to become more involved in his great work of spreading good news in our daily lives? I confess with profound regret that I wasted nearly a decade before I responded to my call to preach, but I acted at once when Christ called me to serve as a chaplain at Wednesfield MHA and I've never regretted acting promptly.

The next two weeks of Lent challenge us to be like Mary, giving of our most precious and best to the Lord in whatever way we can. We shall read again how God's own Son was tempted to hold back from self-sacrifice as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, to find a more expedient solution to redeem sinners like us. Instead, he submitted to the Father's will in the most extravagant gift in history: his life for the sins of the world. We shall read about his betrayal, the desertion of his friends, the show trial and cynical denial of justice by the Roman Prefect of Judea. We shall relive the cruel mockery of the Roman soldiers, the agony and shame of crucifixion and – three days after the seeming failure of Jesus' ministry, his resurrection – **the new thing God did** – that caused Paul to write, **'But all those things that I might count as profit I now reckon as loss for Christ's sake.'**

As we approach Easter, let us make time to think how we can show our extravagant love for Jesus, as individuals, as a church – or even as a Circuit, by setting aside some time to pray and meditate, inviting God to lead us in our discipleship as we face the challenges of life in an increasingly secular, materialist society and then doing our uttermost to answer his call. Amen.

"See from his head, his hands, his feet, / Sorrow and love flow mingled down; / Did e'er such love and sorrow meet, / Or thorns compose so rich a crown?" In 1707 the

father of English hymnody, Isaac Watts, gave us what is probably the finest of all hymns, though he originally intended it to be a communion hymn— number 287, ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’.

1. When I survey the wondrous cross,
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.

2. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.

3. See, from his head, his hands, his feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

4. His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o’er his body on the tree;
Then am I dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

5. 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.

© Isaac Watts {1674 – 1748}

Benediction

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