

Call to worship: Psalm 105 verses 1 to 4

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Amen.

Let us, like the Psalmist, come gladly to worship the Lord our God as we sing a hymn written by Revd. Carl Boberg in Sweden during the summer of 1885 and which came to us via Germany Russia, Ukraine, where it was translated and adapted by a Salvation Army missionary, Stuart Keene Hine, sent to New Zealand, forwarded to Billy Graham in the USA and became popular in the UK during the 1960s. Hymn number 82, 'How great thou art!'

**1. O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy hand hath made,
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,
Thy power throughout the universe displayed: *Chorus***

*Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!
Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee,
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

**2. When through the woods and forest glades I wander
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze: *Chorus***

**3. And when I think that God His Son not sparing,
Sent Him to die – I scarce can take it in.
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,
He bled and died to take away my sin. *Chorus***

**4. When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation
And take me home – what joy shall fill my heart!
Then I shall bow in humble adoration**

And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art! *Chorus* © C. Boberg / Stuart K. Hine
Let us pray.

Almighty God, source and sustainer of life throughout the universe, we come to worship you this Sabbath, for you are mighty, faithful, compassionate and wise. From our beginning, you reached out to us through the patriarchs and prophets so we might know, love and serve you. Even when we rebelled against you and became your enemies, you showed your boundless love by taking human form and living amongst us as Jesus Christ. He not only taught us how you want us to live by words and deeds of loving-kindness, but he atoned for the sins of the world at Calvary. His resurrection completed his triumph over sin and death for our sakes and his gift of the Holy Spirit guides and empowers us as his followers. 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 us light, joy, love and guidance and, most of all, thank you for continuing to love us even at our worst, when we are faithless, loveless and disobedient.

Merciful God, we confess we don’t live as you want us to, for 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 and guide us to lead Christ-centred, loving lives, rather than selfish, uncaring ones. Help us obey your call to serve our neighbours with kindness and generosity of spirit.

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.

Our next hymn is set to an Urdu folk melody and was translated by Dermott Monahan, Principal of Andhra Union Theological College in Hyderabad. He trained at the Methodist College in Handsworth, so we have a local connection.

We shall sing hymn number 252, ‘Jesus the Lord said, “I am the Bread”’

1. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.

The Bread of Life for the world am I,

The Bread of Life for the world am I.’

Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Bread,

The Bread of Life for the world am I’.

2. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Vine,

The true and fruitful Vine am I.’

3. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Way,

The true and living Way am I.’

4. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Light,

The one true Light of the world am I.’

5. Jesus the Lord said: ‘I am the Life,

The Resurrection and the Life am I.’ *Anonymous © tr. Dermott Monahan (1906 – 57)*

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’.

God of all grace, may we 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 for 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 bring about 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 are just and merciful to all-comers. Help us strive to 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 all righteousness, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; oppressive heatwaves; wildfires; floods and droughts, increasingly strong storms and depletion of resources. Help us do what we can to rebuild the environment by changing our lifestyles and by supporting people whose lives are being ruined by extremes of weather. Hear our prayer for countries afflicted by famine and natural disasters. Warm the hearts of governments of wealthy countries to give assistance to victims of disasters and bless the work done by charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of shalom, hear our prayer for peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine and Sudan and for peace among Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. We pray, too for victims of terrorism and oppression that they may find comfort and support in their distress. Bless the work of peacemakers and those who work with the victims of conflict, terrorism, persecution and prejudice.

‘Your kingdom come’, **‘Your will be done’**.

Lord of healing and well-being, may 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 to offer practical support as well as sympathy to those for whom we pray, but hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, for it offers them 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, heavenly Father, look upon us, our friends and families with loving-kindness. In the power of the Holy Spirit, keep us safe, help us resist the temptation to sin, and, most of all help us to live out the gospel message in all that we do and say, so our lives honour your holy name through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 14 verses 13 to 21

When Jesus heard what had happened, he withdrew by boat privately to a solitary place. Hearing of this, the crowds followed him on foot from the towns. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick. As evening approached, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food."

Jesus replied,

"They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

"We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish," they answered.

"Bring them here to me," he said.

And he directed the people to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish and looking up to heaven, he gave thanks and broke the loaves. Then he gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the people. They all ate and were satisfied, and the disciples picked up twelve basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was about five thousand men, besides women and children. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by William Williams, who is considered to have played as important a part in the spiritual awakening of Wales as the Wesley brothers and George Whitefield did in England. Like Charles Wesley, William Williams wrote many hymns, eight hundred in all, but his were mainly in Welsh, for he was determined to speak to his flock in its own tongue. He was known as 'The Sweet Singer of Pantycelyn'. This hymn was translated by Peter Williams who was not related to William. Hymn number 465, 'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,'

**1. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak, but thou art mighty;
Hold me with thy powerful hand:
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven,
Feed me now and evermore.**

**2. Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow;
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer,
Be thou still my strength and shield.**

**3. When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side:
Songs of praises, songs of praises
I will ever give to thee.**

© William Williams (1717 – 1791) trans. by P. Williams (1722 – 1796)

Sermon: Loaves and fishes – Matthew 14: 13 – 21

There are many people, not all of who are agnostic or atheists, who delight in trying to find natural explanations for miracles, not as much to debunk them, but as a mental exercise. Some claim that when Jesus blessed and broke the five loaves and two fish,

those who had brought food with them – but had intended to keep it to themselves – were shamed into sharing it with their neighbours: the miracle lay in the changing of hardened hearts. Another theory from one of my commentaries is that each person only had received a fragment of food, rather like in Holy Communion, but in which case how could twelve baskets of waste be collected? I believe the event must have been exactly as the gospel writers said, for all four recorded this incident and if it were as easily dismissed as sceptics claim, it would not have survived two thousand years' scrutiny.

Let us review the events described by Matthew: having heard of the killing of John the Baptist, Jesus sought solitude, almost certainly in the hills near the town Bethsaida which was on the north-eastern side of the Sea of Galilee, near where the River Jordan empties into the lake. He probably wanted time to reflect upon events, but, as this Bethsaida was in the Province of Gaulonitis, it was under the jurisdiction of the Tetrarch Philip, who loathed Herod Antipas, the killer of John the Baptist, so Jesus and his followers were relatively safe there. However, people heard that he was sailing across the Sea of Galilee, so they walked around the coast, outpacing the boat in which our Lord travelled. Upon seeing the large crowd, Jesus set aside his own desire for solitude and both taught and healed them until late in the day.

At that point, the disciples suggested he dismiss the crowd, so they could go into town and buy food before nightfall, whereupon Jesus told them, **“They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.”** Their despairing response, **“We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish,”** showed that they recognised that the immensity of their task was beyond their powers – either in accessing such a quantity of food, or paying for it. All they had to offer their Lord was a child's meal – not even enough to satisfy a man, let alone a crowd of more than five thousand!

Matthew recorded that Jesus bade the crowd sit on the grass, took the food, gave thanks to God, broke and blessed it, then bade his disciples distribute it. All four gospel writers declared the disciples filled twelve small wicker baskets with leftovers, not only to show everybody had eaten enough, but to show the generous providence of God through Christ. Don't be distracted by the symbolism of the twelve baskets of left-overs. This is the key point: the disciples gave the little they had; Jesus blessed it and it fulfilled the needs of the people. Any attempt at a rational explanation is pointless, for if it were only a parable, or a symbolic story, the gospel writers would not have given it such prominence. Indeed, this is one of the signs pointing to Jesus' divinity, for it harkens back to the manna God provided during the exodus and to Elisha feeding a hundred men with only twenty loaves. In this account, Jesus is shown to be even greater than Moses or Elisha, for he fed five thousand men and unnumbered women and children – a foretaste of the Messianic banquet referred to in our eucharist liturgy.

There is another, important, aspect to this story. The disciples discovered their physical and spiritual resources were inadequate to fulfil their Master's wishes – hence their hopeless response when he told them to feed the multitude themselves. Yet, by offering all they had brought to the Lord, he increased it and they themselves were able to complete their task. It was not just that occasion when Christ's followers realised their own limitations. Despite the resurrection appearances – and a meal by the Sea of Galilee in John's gospel – the hundred and twenty who had locked themselves away in a room in Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension were afraid, generally helpless and hopeless and lacking the ability to answer the risen Lord's Great Commission to take the Good News to the corners of the world. They could not act in their own strength, yet when the Holy Spirit filled them, they received his gifts and poured out into the street, praising God and amazing passers-by with their ebullience, so much so that some Jews

thought they were drunk. Moreover, following Peter's first sermon, three thousand were baptised in Jesus' name – the hundred and twenty was multiplied at least twenty-five times – more if Luke had included only men and not women and children! Just like the five loaves and two fish, God made much of the few who started the Church.

Currently, both the United Kingdom and the wider world are faced by deep crises: financial; environmental; political; health and social to name just a few. When we consider the sheer numbers of issues, it would be so easy to throw up our hands in despair and say we are too few in number – or too busy – or too old (perish the thought) to meet the needs of our community, let alone the needs of our broken world. Like the disciples, when Jesus instructed them to feed the multitude, we may feel that all we have to offer is the equivalent of the boy's meal, yet don't fall into the mind-set that will disempower us. We are part of the body of Christ. Remember, even after the COVID restrictions which has affected church attendance, more people still go to church every Sunday than attended football matches.

Therefore, consider this: if all Christians in the UK were to offer an average of only £1 to All We Can or the Disasters Emergency Committee, that contribution would make a surprising difference. Moreover, we could encourage family members and friends to donate, too, for these charities ensure that the monies raised goes directly to help the victims and is not siphoned off by corrupt officials. Like the boy with the loaves and fish, what we offer can and will be used by the Lord to save people in famine or disaster-stricken countries. Similarly, if we unite in campaigns, we can influence politicians, local and national – for example by lobbying for a return to the 1.7% Gross National Income level for overseas development.

Perhaps some of us may feel we have little to offer Christ, not only in material terms, but in talents and service. I wonder how many of us have failed to answer our Saviour's call to serve because of our sense of inadequacy, or because we fear failure? My friends, if Jesus has called, or is calling you to serve him within this church, or in the community, respond, even if you feel inadequate. I took ten years before I answered my call to preach, which is one of the privileges of my life. Mind you, think of all those cremated dinners since I began twenty nine years ago! Seriously, if the Lord wants you to serve him in any capacity, he will provide the resources, both material and physical, to answer his call. **Let us be the 'loaves and fishes' that satisfy the needs of many and thereby glorify Christ our Saviour. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green in 1969 and entitled, 'The Caring Church'. We shall sing hymn number 415, 'The Church of Christ, in every age'

**1. The Church of Christ, in every age,
Beset by change, but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.**

**2. Across the world, across the street,
The victims of injustice cry
For shelter and for bread to eat,
And never live until they die.**

**3. Then let the servant Church arise,
A caring Church that longs to be
A partner in Christ's sacrifice,
And clothed in Christ's humanity.**

4. For he alone, whose blood was shed,
Can cure the fever in our blood
And teach us how to share our bread
And feed the starving multitude.

5. We have no mission but to serve
In full obedience to our Lord:
To care for all, without reserve,
And spread his liberating Word.

© *F. Pratt Green {1903 – 2000}*

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.