

A service for 6th November, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 145 verses 1 to 5

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Doreen Newport in a children's class at Emmanuel Congregational Church in Cambridge. Doreen invited the children to think of things to thank God for. She began by asking them what the world would be without and asked them for the next word. The result is a hymn of many verses – eight in "Singing the Faith". We shall just sing verses 1, 2, 7 and 8. Hymn number 92, 'Think of a world without any flowers'.

**1. Think of a world without any flowers,
Think of a wood without any trees,
Think of a sky without any sunshine,
Think of the air without any breeze.**

We thank You, Lord, for flowers and trees and sunshine.

We thank You, Lord, and praise Your holy name.

**2. Think of a world without any animals,
Think of a field without any herd,
Think of a stream without any fishes,
Think of a dawn without any bird.**

We thank You, Lord, for all Your living creatures.

We thank You, Lord and praise Your holy name.

**7. Think of a world without any worship,
Think of a God without His Only Son,
Think of a cross without resurrection,
Only a grave and not a victory won.**

We thank You, Lord, for showing us our Saviour.

We thank You, Lord, and praise Your holy name.

**8. Thanks to our Lord for being here among us,
Thanks be to Him for sharing all we do.
Thanks for our Church and all the love we find here.
Thanks for this place and all its promise true.**

We thank You, Lord, for life in all its richness.

We thank You, Lord, and praise Your holy name.

© Doreen E. Newport (1927 – 2004)

Let us pray.

Sovereign God, your Word created everything that lives throughout the universe: you formed the sun, moon, stars and this beautiful planet, yet despite your boundless power, you have cared for sinful human beings so much that from our first days you tried to draw us close to you. Even when we rebelled against you and made ourselves your enemies, you sent your Son, Christ Jesus, to reveal your boundless love by his

life, death and resurrection. Help us, therefore, to pray to you in faith, to sing our hymns joyfully and to both hear and respond to your holy word.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the many blessings we have received from you: for the beautiful world you created for us; for all the good things that we enjoy, as well as experiences and challenges that make our lives interesting and leave us happy memories. Above all else, thank you for Jesus, who broke the power of sin and death, and offers us new life at the end of our earthly days.

Merciful God, although Jesus showed us how we should live in righteousness, we confess that we don't always follow his example, for we say and do things that upset, or hurt other people and grieve you. Moreover, we don't always help those we see in need, or distress when we know we really ought to. Gracious God, we are truly sorry and, as we turn away from our sins, we ask you to forgive us for the sake of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Loving Lord, we believe you have heard and answered our prayer, offering us your pardon for our wrongdoing. Therefore, Lord, help us to serve both you and our neighbours both faithfully and warm-heartedly from now onwards, in Jesus' beautiful name. 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.

We continue with a hymn 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. 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)

We shall now bring our concerns for the world to our Lord.

Lord, you have given us a beautiful, self-sustaining planet upon which to live, but our hearts sink when we see so much suffering around us, much of which is the result of human greed, pride, foolishness and indifference. Where we are able to serve you, use us as your earthly hands. Grant us the compassion, courage, wisdom and steadfastness to be effective, but where we can't bring about the changes the world requires, we ask you to prompt and warm the hearts of people who have the power, skill and influence to intervene, for all things are possible to you.

Gracious God, news reports of conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem, civil strife in Iran and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia with threats of escalation into nuclear exchanges make us all anxious for the future of mankind. As Prince of peace, hear our prayer for an end to wars and strife which mar so many countries around the world, bringing destruction, death, injury and displacement. Warm and mould the hearts of the leaders of all nations and guide them in the ways of justice and mercy through which lasting peace can be achieved.

Generous God, we pray for the victims of floods in Pakistan and of recent hurricanes in Haiti, Cuba and Florida, that they may receive speedy help. We remember, too, our neighbours in countries facing severe famines like Afghanistan and those in the horn of Africa, where droughts and conflict have exacerbated the situation. We ask a blessing on organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid which are working to provide them with desperately-needed aid. May they succeed in bringing relief to those needy lands.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy and rise in inflation increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which are helping the poor. Despite the dire economic situation, may the Government and other agencies, including the Church find ways of helping people who are facing the awful choice of heating their homes, or eating to manage during the coming winter.

Lord of shalom, of healing and wellbeing, we offer our prayer for neighbours who are ill, or in any kind of need or trouble, for people who are living with anxiety or depression, or those whose relationships have broken down but, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear and find it difficult to come to terms with their grief. In a time of quiet reflection, we offer names of those for whom we are particularly concerned – confident that, as we name them in our hearts, you will know and meet their needs. Heavenly Father, help us to support them in whatever way we can, but embrace them all with your love, so they may be healed, comforted, given hope, encouraged and blessed with enduring peace.

Lord, we pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. As we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus into a financial crisis, help us to renew and alter our ministries to our communities, so we can meet our neighbours' needs and offer not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. May we have faith to bear the gospel light of hope and joy to our suffering, sin-darkened world.

Abba, Father God, Bless us, our families and friends. Inspire us to keep Christ at the centre of our lives, so we share the abundance of your love in all we do and say, in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is St. Luke chapter 20 verses 27 to 38

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question.

“Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

Jesus replied,

“The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” Amen.

George Wallace Briggs wrote our next hymn for the Hymn Society of America when it asked for new hymns to be written to celebrate the publication of the Revised Standard Bible in 1952. It first appeared in the UK in the “Baptist Hymn Book” of 1962, which also premiered “Great is thy faithfulness”, though it had been written in 1923! We shall sing hymn number 157, ‘God has spoken – by his prophets’.

- 1. God has spoken – by his prophets,
Spoken his unchanging word,
Each from age to age proclaiming
God, the one, the righteous Lord.
‘Mid the world’s despair and turmoil
One firm anchor holds us fast:
God is King, his throne eternal,
God the first and God the last.**
- 2. God has spoken – by Christ Jesus,
Christ, the everlasting Son,
Brightness of the Father’s glory,
With the Father ever one;
Spoken by the Word incarnate,
God from God, ere time was born,
Light from Light, to earth descending,
Man, revealing God to all.**
- 3. God has spoken – by his Spirit,
Speaking to our hearts again,
In the age-long word expounding**

**God's own message, now as then.
Through the rise and fall of nations
One sure faith is standing fast;
God still speaks, the Word unchanging,
God the first and God the last.**

© George Wallace Briggs (1875 – 1959)

Sermon: *'He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive'* – Luke 20:38

In the song, "If I were a rich man," from "The Fiddler on the Roof", Tevye the Milkman refers to neighbours 'posing problems that would cross a rabbi's eyes'. Well, in our gospel reading, the Sadducees posed a problem that they thought would not only defeat Jesus, but would demonstrate that the idea of resurrection is absurd. This is the only time in Luke's gospels when the Sadducees are mentioned as opponents of Christ, but their opposition came hard on the heels of several attempts to discredit, or incriminate Jesus by the Pharisees. Sadducees were the temple-based aristocracy of Judea, who favoured the status quo, as it bolstered their power. Unlike the Pharisees, Sadducees did not accept the idea of resurrection, so they used an example from levirate law, which by the time of Jesus was no longer practised, to attempt to undermine the concept of life after death.

Under levirate law – Deuteronomy 25 – if a childless woman was widowed, a brother of the dead husband was required to marry her to produce a son to preserve the dead man's name, though other children would bear the second husband's name. The idea of an unfortunate woman, who married seven brothers, all of whom died without producing a child, is extreme in itself, but clearly, the question which of the seven brothers would be the husband of the wife at the resurrection is unanswerable in earthly terms. I am sure some of our most eminent barristers could grow even richer arguing the case without producing a resolution, but Jesus was not daunted. Indeed, he added a riposte that sent the Sadducees away vanquished and humbled before the Scribes.

Christ was quite scathing as he replied that resurrected life will not be the same as mortal life. To begin with, after resurrection, there will be no more death, so there will be no more need to procreate and relationships in the afterlife will be free from human conventions and traditions: **"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection."** The Sadducees' rejection of the very idea of resurrection limited their thinking and they assumed that any afterlife would be a mere continuation of mortal life, (with which they were perfectly content should be), whereas Jesus taught that the children of the resurrection will enjoy a markedly different existence, living in the light of the Father's love, freed from earthly constraints and rules.

Having answered their hypothetical case, Jesus turned to the Pentateuch, which Sadducees accepted, unlike the books of the Prophets which they didn't, to show that it taught immortality. He referred to **Exodus chapter 3** when Moses approached the burning bush and was told he was on holy ground, for God told him, **"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."** In other words, by saying 'I am', God indicated that the patriarchs were still alive, **for only living people have a living God** and though death breaks human relationships, it

cannot break our relationship with God. Jesus thus demonstrated the flaws in Sadducee teaching, using Holy Scriptures that they had declared true. Effectively, they had been hoist with their own petard!

What can we learn from the passage? We live in an age when all faiths, not only Christianity, are under attack from aggressive secularists like Richard Dawkins. Even the idea of God is ridiculed and scientific theories are being employed as tools to undermine his existence. The worst thing we can do is to turn our back on these theories, to deny their existence and validity by adopting the same rigid attitudes that led to the persecution of Galileo over his claim that the earth travels around the sun, or to the rejection of Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution by some Christians. Such theories are not a denial of God's existence; indeed, in many ways they add lustre to the wonders of life. If faith is undermined by knowledge, then its foundations are too shallow. Let science explain **how** life was created and evolved, if it can, for it cannot explain **why** creation occurred, or **why** millions of human beings believe in a God who loves us so much he gave his Son to save us from the power of sin and death.

The main comfort we can take from our reading is that, as God is the God of the living and the dead, we ought to concentrate on living now, in the real world, rather than diverting ourselves with ideas of a better life in the hereafter and failing to work for a fairer, more compassionate world. Jesus is alive and works through us in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, every day is an opportunity for us to make a difference to the world around us, whether by sharing time with friends, or showing kindness to strangers, campaigning for the Developing World, or supporting church projects, warm spaces, food banks and / or the Shoe Box Appeal. **Above all things, let us share the abundant love with which Christ blesses us, for shared love is the key that can open people's hearts to the Good News which Christ calls us to take to the world. Amen.**

Our closing hymn was written by a suffragan Bishop of Thetford and a very gifted hymn-writer, Timothy Dudley-Smith. It considers God in the past present and future, holy, unchangeable and faithful. We sing hymn number 470, 'Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided'.

**1. Lord, for the Years, your love has kept and guided,
Urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
Sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.**

**2. Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
Speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
Teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.**

**3. Lord, for our land in this our generation,
Spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:
For young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.**

**4. Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt you,
Loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,
Hungry and helpless, lost indeed without you:**

Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

**5. Lord for ourselves; in living pow'r remake us –
Self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,
Past put behind us, for the future take us:
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.**

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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 now and forever more. Amen.