

A service for 6th September, 2020 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 119 verses 33 to 36

Teach me, LORD, the meaning of your laws, and I will obey them at all times. Explain your law to me, and I will obey it; I will keep it with all my heart. Keep me obedient to your commandments, because in them I find happiness. Give me the desire to obey your laws rather than to get rich. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light of God's good news to guide us. It was written by Bernadette Farrell, a gifted Roman Catholic hymn-writer, a social activist from West Yorkshire, who was the first Deputy Director of Citizens UK and whose hymns span all denominations. 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:

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Let us turn to the Lord in prayer. In our prayer of adoration and thanksgiving, when I say 'Almighty God', please respond with 'all glory, honour, power and praise are yours'.

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.

Almighty God all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.

Faithful God, in your compassion you seek to sustain all life and 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.

Almighty God **all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.**

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 **all glory, honour, power and praise are yours.**

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled through your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in spirit and truth. We offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you, but most of all for loving us even we are loveless and unlovable, even though we often don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we ought. In Jesus' holy name, help us to amend our ways, O Lord. Forgive us for 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 not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again. May we do so in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by serving 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.

“In blazing light your cross reveals / The truth we dimly knew, / How small the debts men owe to us, / How great our debt to you!” Wonderful words by Leeds schoolteacher, Rosamond Herklots. We shall sing hymn number 423, ““Forgive our sins as we forgive,”

**1. ‘Forgive our sins as we forgive’,
You taught us, Lord, to pray,
But you alone can grant us grace
To live the words we say.**

**2. How can your pardon reach and bless
The unforgiving heart
That broods on wrongs, and will not let
Old bitterness depart?**

**3. In blazing light your cross reveals
The truth we dimly knew,
How small the debts men owe to us,
How great our debt to you!**

**4. Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls,
And bid resentment cease;
Then, reconciled to God and man,
Our lives will spread your peace.**

In our prayers of intercession we bring our concerns to God.

God of all grace, once again we thank you for the wonderful world on which we live. However, we are only too aware of the brokenness that mars the glory of this planet, much of which is due to mankind's failure to live as you call us to, both in our stewardship and in our relationships with one another. In response to the many blessings we receive from you, we offer ourselves to act as your earthly hands, by reaching out to neighbours who are in any kind of trouble or need. Grant us courage, steadfastness, wisdom and compassion so we may serve as you want us to. When we recognize circumstances when we know we are powerless, we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

God of all nations, teach the leaders of this world to rule wisely and compassionately, seeking justice and peace, rather than resorting to violence when they cannot have their way. We pray especially for peace in countries where there is conflict, especially in Syria, Libya, Belarus and Sudan. Loving Lord breathe new life into situations that seem hopeless and let your love overcome the hatred in human hearts. We pray for an end of oppression toward black people in the USA, as we examine our consciences about minority groups in this country, too.

Heavenly Father, grant national leaders the wisdom to adopt policies that will protect the population until the COVID19 pandemic is brought under control. We pray for the NHS, scientists and keyworkers as they continue their struggle to bring an end to this threat to humankind. Keep them safe and help them to successfully produce a vaccine, or vaccine that works. Help us to patiently observe guidelines laid down by the Government, difficult and confusing though they often are. Remember teachers and pupils as they begin a new school year. May the measures they will take enable young people to return to learning and socialising safely and may the re-opening of schools not result in a spike of COVID19. Most of all, help us to feel that you are with us throughout this time of trial, so we can all find comfort in your saving grace.

Lord of wellbeing, may the light of your love shine upon people in our community who are sick in body, mind or spirit, particularly anybody with coronavirus. Let them feel your presence in their need and may all of them find healing, renewed strength, comfort and hope, through their treatment. Gracious God, reach out to people who are living with a dementia, their friends, carers and families, especially in these turbulent times. Comfort them in their distress, reassure them when they are confused and grant them a sense of being loved and valued for who they are, despite the great problems they face.

Loving God, hear our prayer for neighbours who are lonely, afraid, broken-hearted, overworked, unemployed, or who are facing the loss of their jobs when furlough ends. We pray for everybody whose relationship has broken down during lockdown, as well as all who mourn the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we offer names of people for whom we are particularly concerned, confident that you will know their needs and will reach out to them.....

Lord, help us to offer them practical support and friendship and hold everybody for whom we pray in the warm embrace of your love, from which they may find healing, courage, strength and enduring peace.

Lord, hear our prayer for your Church, both locally and worldwide: unite us in spirit, love and truth, so we reveal that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Help your Church begin to plan for the ending of lockdown, as it faces many serious issues that have arisen during the past six months. Help us to find ways of supporting our communities and to continue to bear the Gospel light bravely in a sceptical and often hostile world.

Abba, Father God, we ask you to bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us not only to lead good lives but to be bold in sharing your abundant love with both friends and strangers, in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

Our next hymn was written by Robert Walmsley, a Mancunian jeweller and a Sunday School teacher at a Congregational church. It speaks of God's boundless, amazing love for all-comers, agape. We shall sing hymn number 443, 'Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,'

**1. Come, let us sing of a wonderful love,
Tender and true;**

**Out of the heart of the Father above,
Streaming to me and to you;**

Wonderful love

Dwells in the heart of the Father above.

**2. Jesus, the Saviour, this gospel to tell,
Joyfully came;**

**Came with the helpless and hopeless to dwell,
Sharing their sorrow and shame;**

Seeking the lost,

Saving, redeeming at measureless cost.

**3. Jesus is seeking the wanderers yet;
Why do they roam?**

Love only waits to forgive and forget;

Home, weary wanderer, home!

Wonderful love

Dwells in the heart of the Father above.

**4. Come to my heart, O thou wonderful love,
Come and abide,**

Lifting my life, till it rises above

Envy and falsehood and pride,

Seeking to be

Lowly and humble, a learner of thee.

© Robert Walmsley {1831 – 1905}

The Epistle is Paul's Letter to the Romans chapter 13 verses 8 to 14

Be under obligation to no one—the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else"—all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." If you love someone, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law.

You must do this, because you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep. For the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed. The night is nearly over, day is almost here. Let us stop doing the things that belong to the dark, and let us take up weapons for fighting in the light.

Let us conduct ourselves properly, as people who live in the light of day—no orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. But take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 18 verses 15 to 20

“If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that ‘every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,’ as the scripture says. And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector.

And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”
Amen.

The author of our next hymn was Revd. Theodore Monod, who was born in Paris in 1836 and became a Pastor in the French Reformed Church in Paris in 1860. He wrote the hymn we are going to sing during a series of Consecration meetings held at Broadlands, England, in July 1874. It was given to Lord Mount-Temple at the close of the meetings, and was printed by his lordship on the back of a programme card for another series of similar meetings held at Oxford in October of that year. Sir H. W. Baker later expressed his great regret that it was not included in the revised edition of “Hymns Ancient & Modern.” We shall sing hymn number 432, ‘O, the bitter shame and sorrow’.

**1. O the bitter shame and sorrow,
That a time could ever be
When I let the Saviour’s pity
Plead in vain, and proudly answered:
All of self and none of thee!**

**2. Yet you found me; I beheld him
Bleeding on the accursed tree,
Heard him pray, ‘Forgive them, Father,’
And my wistful heart said faintly,
Some of self and some of thee!**

**3. Day by day his tender mercy,
Healing, helping, full and free,
Sweet and strong and, ah! so patient,
Brought me lower, while I whispered,
Less of self and more of thee!**

**4. Higher than the highest heaven,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, thy love at last has conquered;
Grant me now my supplication:
None of self, and all of thee!**

© Theodore Monod (1836 – 1921)

Sermon: “Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law.”– Rom. 13: 10

How do we show we're followers of Christ? **Unlike orthodox Jews, we don't wear a kippah, tallit, or tefillin. Unlike Moslems, we don't wear a prayer cap and shalwar kameez; unlike Sikhs, we don't wear a turban, a dagger, a comb, or a ceremonial bracelet.** Some of us may wear a cross necklace, or an ichthus on our lapel, or put a cross, or ichthus on our car, but that can be done by anybody, if they choose. So, how then should people be able to see we're Christians? **It should not be as much by symbols, but rather how we behave.** Our words and deeds should let the light of Christ's love shine through them, acting as a pointer to God's redemptive grace for all. However, Christian history is littered with fractured relationships, hatred, litigation and even the killing of opponents. I was reminded of this, several years ago, when Carol and I visited St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford – a beautiful church in which John Wesley preached. However, it was also the church from which Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley were taken to be burnt at the stake for being Protestants. **Sometimes the Lord must have wondered which side the Church was on!**

Even when Matthew was writing his gospel, he clearly felt it necessary to remind his audience about Jesus' teaching of treatment of fellow Christians who had committed a sin. It is worth noting that in many early manuscripts words, **'against you'**, is omitted, so it is likely Jesus was offering advice about general, rather than personal, wrongdoing. Whatever the case, the first step was to be a one-to-one discussion, so the wrongdoer wasn't exposed to public criticism, but had an opportunity to repent privately and rectify matters. Even if an offender rejected this approach, Christians were cautioned to be patient, seeking the support of two friends, or two witnesses, following **Deuteronomic rules (Deut. 19)**, to add weight to the complaint, hoping that when the offender saw it wasn't just his word against another's, he'd accept he was in the wrong and repent with as little adverse publicity as possible. Jesus' principle was of restorative justice, not humiliation and retribution.

Only if the person steadfastly refused to accept his wrongdoing, was he to face the whole Christian community, but if the church agreed that he was at fault and he still remained unrepentant, then he was to be ostracised – with the same hostility Jews felt for pagans and tax-collectors. In other words, the sinner should be given every opportunity to acknowledge his sin and to rectify matters, without his faults being exposed to all and sundry. It is clear that only the most foolish, or hardened offender would reject as many chances and face exclusion from the community. There was no mention of ASBOs here; offenders were to be given opportunities to quietly put things right and to resume discipleship without being stigmatised. They were to be treated with patient love, not hostility, for Jesus, who pleaded for God to forgive those who were crucifying him, asks us to give offenders opportunities to repent. **That is a real challenge in the light of some awful crimes that we learn of through the Media, for when those involved have received their punishment, how can they be reintegrated into society and become good citizens? Yet what is the alternative but to try?**

Paul's letter to the Roman churches was written around AD57, when the number of Gentile Christians there outnumbered their Jewish brothers and sisters. As a result, there was considerable tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians, especially as the former wanted to keep some Hebrew traditions which Gentiles rejected. Paul reminded the Church that although Gentiles outnumbered their Jewish peers, they must respect them, for their heritage – and ours – comes from a Jewish base.

He also told early Christians that they must pay taxes to Caesar, so they weren't seen as subversives. Indeed, Christians were told to fulfil their civil duties and to let the only debt outstanding be, **'the continuing debt to love one another'**. Paul added, **'He who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law'**, in other words righteousness is found in love, not in a series of rules, for although the **Torah** directs us to live according to God's will, by Jesus' time Jews had been burdened by **613 rules** derived from the law of Moses – rules which were almost impossible for ordinary Jews to honour fully. Paul went to the heart of the matter by declaring that all we really need to do to please God is to love our neighbour as oneself, **for if we do, we won't sin against them.**

Some may argue that when he was asked what is the greatest Commandment, Jesus replied, **"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'** This is the first and greatest commandment. **And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." However, rabbis like Paul's teacher, **Gamaliel, quoted Leviticus**, **'Love your neighbour as yourself,'** taking as spoken that, by so doing, our commitment to and love of God has been honoured, too. Indeed, on one occasion, the great **Rabbi Hillel** was approached by a Gentile who wanted to follow the Jewish faith. The **proselyte** asked Hillel to teach him the Torah as he stood on one leg, so after a moment's thought, the rabbi replied, **"Do not do unto a neighbour anything that is hateful to you. The rest is commentary: go and learn it!"**

So, there it is: our path to a right relationship with God is to love other people wholeheartedly. No sacrifices are necessary to earn God's favour; no herculean tasks; no uniform or worn symbol should be needed to mark us out as different, though we may choose to wear one. **Christ Jesus earned our salvation when he became the perfect sacrifice for all sins at Calvary.** Therefore, we should be recognisable as Christians by our words and actions, by our willingness to help the needy, or distressed, here and abroad, by our willingness to forgive those who wrong us – not that this is easy – and by our outreach to strangers as well as our own. If we need an example of how to act, just look at Jesus in the gospels.

Paul ended by calling fellow Christians to put on the armour of light, to be seen for who and what they were in a world of darkness that was about to persecute all who declared that, **'Jesus is Lord'**. Although we're not persecuted for our faith in the United Kingdom, the darkness of sin and despair in an increasingly secular society is only too evident whenever we watch or listen to the news on television or radio. However, the picture is not hopeless, for occasionally in the news we hear of the heroism of health-workers, or acts of kindness during this coronavirus pandemic. As disciples, we have been called to offer love and hope to our communities, therefore, it is all the more important that we should also put on our armour of light as a defence against a godless existence and as a means of guiding other people by our example – to love their neighbours and to come to know and serve our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We close our worship with a hymn by Charles Wesley. Hymn number 550, 'Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go'.

**1. Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go,
My daily labour to pursue;
Thee, only thee, resolved to know
In all I think, or speak, or do.**

2. The task thy wisdom has assigned

**O let me cheerfully fulfil,
In all my works thy presence find,
And prove thy good and perfect will.**

**3. Thee may I set at my right hand,
Whose eyes my inmost substance see,
And labour on at thy command,
And offer all my works to thee.**

**4. Give me to bear thy easy yoke,
And every moment watch and pray,
And still to things eternal look,
And hasten to thy glorious day.**

**5. For thee delightfully employ
Whate'er thy bounteous grace has given,
And run my course with even joy,
And closely walk with thee to heaven.**

© *Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)*

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.