

A Service for 7th February, 2021 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 147 verses 1 and 7 to 11

Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving; make music to our God on the harp. He covers the sky with clouds; he supplies the earth with rain and makes grass grow on the hills. He provides food for the cattle and for the young ravens when they call. His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love. Amen.

Our opening hymn reminds us of our need for the light and truth of Christ to guide us. It was written in 1993 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 Listen to 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:*

© Bernadette Farrell {1957---}

Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to you in awe and wonder, for you are the Creator of the universe and life within it, the Source of wisdom and Fountain of grace. Hear and accept our worship and adoration.

Loving Son, our Saviour and friend, we come to you with joyful, thankful hearts, for you shared our mortal form and lived among us. Your life, death and resurrection saves us from the power of sin and death. Hear and accept our worship and adoration.

Spirit of the living God, we come to you with praise and thanksgiving, for you live within us as our comforter, guide and empowerment. Lead us in our discipleship so we may love and serve as you call us to. Hear and accept our worship and adoration.

Lord of all, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all honour, glory, power and praise are yours, now and forevermore. Amen.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the good things we receive from you: our lives, our work and rest, for people who have guided us, inspired us and cared for us; for experiences and challenges that have brought us pleasure and fulfilment, but most of all for your undying grace, revealed through Christ Jesus, your Son, our Saviour.

Amazing God, as we consider your holiness, we know that, despite our efforts to live as you call us to, we still fall short of what we ought to be. Merciful Lord forgive us for failing to love our neighbours as we love ourselves, for times when our discipleship is half-hearted, or occasions when we ignore your call. Help us to amend our sinful ways and pardon us in Jesus' holy name.

God of grace, you hear and answer our prayers and throw open your arms to embrace us with forgiveness. As we have been freed from the burden of guilt, may we respond to your grace by answering Christ's call to serve him, faithfully and joyfully, so we may glorify you in his holy name. Amen.

We say the prayer that Jesus gave his disciples.

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 our worship with a hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Their hymns are usually set to old Scots ballads, but this is sung to a French carol melody, 'Noel Nouvelet'. Hymn number 251, 'Jesus, Christ is waiting,'

**1. Jesus Christ is waiting,
Waiting in the streets;
No one is his neighbour,
All alone he eats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am lonely, too:
Make me, friend or stranger,
Fit to wait on you.**

**2. Jesus Christ is raging,
Raging in the streets,
Where injustice spirals
And real hope retreats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I am angry, too:
In the kingdom's causes,
Let me rage with you.**

**3. Jesus Christ is healing,
Healing in the streets,**

**Curing those who suffer,
Touching those he greets.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I have pity, too:
Let my care be active,
Healing, just like you.**

**4. Jesus Christ is dancing,
Dancing in the streets,
Where each sign of hatred
He, with love, defeats.
Listen, Lord Jesus,
I should triumph, too:
Where good conquers evil,
Let me dance with you.**

**5. Jesus Christ is calling,
Calling in the streets,
'Who will join my journey?
I will guide their feet.'
Listen, Lord Jesus,
Let my fears be few:
Walk one step before me;
I will follow you.**

© *John L. Bell (B 1949) & Graham Maule (B 1958)*

Let us come to God again in prayer.

Most gracious and amazing God, we rejoice in this beautiful, wonderful planet on which we live and in your sustaining grace. However, we are aware of the suffering of neighbours both nearby and further afield, more often than not as a result of human pride, selfishness, cruelty, avarice or indifference. We recognize that you have blessed us throughout our lives and so we ask you to help us to play our part to heal some of the world's brokenness, however small our role may be. We know, too, that our powers are limited, so many situations are far beyond our powers to remedy, but they are not beyond yours.

Gracious God, hear our prayer for our world. May your blessing be bestowed upon all peoples and all races, especially the blessing of peace in countries which are suffering the ravages of war, persecution and terrorism. Lord, we bring to you our prayer for the victims of mankind's inhumanity to man. Grant them the support and courage they need to build a new, better and secure future. We pray that the leaders of the world learn to seek the ways of peace and to negotiate and compromise instead of using force against opponents. May the leaders of countries where people are persecuted for their beliefs, race or gender, will turn and seek mercy and justice in their dealings. We pray for the population of Myanmar after the military takeover. May there be a peaceful resolution to this crisis.

Loving God, we pray for our community: may we answer your call to serve you through the mission of our churches, or by supporting food banks, street pastors, the Salvation Army and organizations that serves the poor and vulnerable in our society.

We pray for the churches in our area and for the World Church. Guide us through this pandemic, so we can serve our communities and support the poor and broken-

hearted, both here and abroad. Help us to find new ways, to not only preach Good News but to live it day by day and to be a light of hope in a gloomy world. Help us play our part in building a world where we stand up against poverty, here and abroad, where we desire justice for all-comers and always seek the common good; a world where we are willing to work together in mutual trust and to share justly the earth's resources, rather than fighting over them.

Loving Lord, guide those who govern us and their advisors that they may adopt policies that will bring us safely through this pandemic. Give them the courage and wisdom to do what is right whether or not it is popular or politically expedient.

We ask your blessing upon the NHS, keyworkers and scientists as they strive to heal us and keep us safe. Lockdown makes us feel disempowered, confused, unsure of what to pray for. Hear and answer the groaning of our spirit and grant us the wisdom and courage we need to face an uncertain future, with hope grounded in your boundless, redemptive love.

Lord of healing and wellbeing, remember people who are suffering from sickness, grief or trouble, that they may find healing, renewed strength and peace, not only as a result of the care and support they are given, but by experiencing your holy presence in their time of need. In your mercy reach out to people who are living with a dementia, besides their friends, carers and families, who seek to support them.

We pray for everybody who is facing unemployment, addictions, broken relationships, loneliness and especially bereavement at a time when we are already burdened with uncertainty. Help us to be sensitive to the needs of our neighbours, so we can offer friendship and practical support to them.

In a time of silence, we pray for everyone we know who needs your help.....
Loving Lord, hold them in the warmth of your love, so they experience the fullness of your comfort, hope and peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all and our friends and families. Keep us free from harm, help us to resist the temptation to sin and may the way we live bring you glory, through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Although the limitations of "Singing the Faith" frequently irritate me, I have to acknowledge there are some superb new hymns, one of which is Jean Holloway's, 'Lord, we come to ask your healing,' sung to the lovely Welsh melody "All through the night", or "Ar hyd y nos". Number 652, 'Lord, we come to ask your healing'.

1. Lord, we come to ask your healing,

Teach us of love;

All unspoken shame revealing,

Teach us of love.

Take our selfish thoughts and actions,

Petty feuds, divisive factions,

Hear us now to you appealing,

Teach us of love.

2. Soothe away our pain and sorrow,

Hold us in love;

Grace we cannot buy or borrow,

Hold us in love.

Though we see but dark and danger,

Though we spurn both friend and stranger,

**Though we often dread tomorrow,
Hold us in love.**

**3. When the bread is raised and broken,
Fill us with love;
Words of consecration spoken,
Fill us with love.
As our grateful prayers continue,
Make the faith that we have in you
More than just an empty token,
Fill us with love.**

**4. Help us live for one another,
Bind us in love;
Stranger, neighbour, father, mother –
Bind us in love.
All are equal at your table,
Through your Spirit make us able
To embrace as sister, brother,
Bind us in love.**

© *Jean Holloway (born 1939)*

The Old Testament reading is Isaiah chapter 40 verses 21 to 31

Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded? He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff.

“To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal?” says the Holy One. Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing.

Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel, “My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause is disregarded by my God”? Do you not know? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Mark chapter 1 verses 29 to 39

As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed:

“Everyone is looking for you!”

Jesus replied,

“Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come.” So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons. Amen.

Another ‘new’ hymn is written by the wonderful Revd. Fred Pratt Green! Number 653, ‘O Christ, the Healer, we have come’.

**1. O Christ, the Healer, we have come
To pray for health, to plead for friends.
How can we fail to be restored,
When reached by love that never ends?**

**2. From every ailment flesh endures
Our bodies clamour to be freed;
Yet in our hearts we would confess
That wholeness is our deepest need.**

**3. How strong, O Lord, are our desires,
How weak our knowledge of ourselves!
Release in us those healing truths
Unconscious pride resists or shelves.**

**4. In conflicts that destroy our health
We diagnose the world’s disease;
Our common life declares our ills;
Is there no cure, O Christ, for these?**

**5. Grant that we all, made one in faith,
In your community may find
The wholeness that, enriching us,
Shall reach the whole of humankind.**

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Sermon

The crucial task for early evangelists was to convince listeners that Jesus was more than exceptional rabbi, or gifted healer: that he is God’s Son, both fully human and divine. Mark wrote the first half of his gospel to give readers an opportunity to discover Jesus’ true nature in the way his disciples’ eyes were opened, for until the eighth chapter, Jesus neither called himself ‘Messiah’, nor acknowledged that title. This “Messianic Secret” allows us to share the disciples’ wonder and confusion they walked with the Lord, heard his teaching, saw his healings and miracles and marvelled at his love for the poor, sick, outcast and marginalised in society. Only after this did Peter act as their spokesman by declaring, “You are the Christ.”

In our gospel reading, Jesus, James and John went to the home of Simon Peter and Andrew to find a crisis, for Peter’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever which Luke recorded as a ‘high fever’, possibly more life-threatening than uncomfortable. As soon as Jesus took her by her hand and helped her up, Peter’s mother-in-law was healed, so completely she was able to serve them at their meal, which I presume had been prepared by Peter’s wife. It is easy to overlook that Jesus hadn’t only healed by the warmth of personal touch, but had made himself ritually unclean, according to the

Torah, by physical contact with the sick. This was his second healing on the Sabbath which demonstrates teaching that chesed or loving-kindness took priority over rules and customs for Christ.

It is worth noting that other Jews in Capernaum observed the Sabbath rules, for Mark wrote that they came in droves with people who were physically, spiritually and mentally ill after sunset, for the Sabbath ends when the first three stars can be seen at dusk. Three kinds of people came to Peter's house that evening: the sick; those who brought them and the curious, who came to see what Jesus would do. As with the man possessed by an evil spirit at the synagogue in Capernaum, Jesus forbade the evil spirits of those he healed to name him the 'Holy One of God', leaving his disciples, other witnesses and us to make that judgement.

Isaiah declared, "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary." Mark showed that, although Jesus is divine, he was also human, for there are several instances of Christ becoming physically exhausted, yet after the many healings at Peter's house, he rose very early next morning, the first day of the week, in order to find quiet place to pray. This illustrates that prayer was a most important part of his ministry, because it provided spiritual food for his work. Inevitably, Peter and the other disciples sought him out and when Peter found him he said, "Everyone is looking for you!"

What was their purpose for seeking him: for healing, or to see Jesus perform more 'signs of kingdom'? Whatever their motivation, Jesus was clearly not seeking self-aggrandisement, for he retorted, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." His mission was to take Good News to the world, not to build a power-base in a supportive town. Jesus wasn't content to bask in local fame as a miracle worker and healer: his task was to take on evil wherever possible and to offer healing for brokenness.

As Twenty-first Century disciples, we're challenged to take Good News to our community, even to the world in general, wherever Christ calls us to serve, but it is easy to feel beaten down by our increasingly secular society in which Christian values are often misrepresented and attacked by the Media and prominent celebrities. Certainly, the COVID19 pandemic will give secularists opportunities to blame God, accusing him for what has happened, or for being unable or unwilling to prevent it. They ignore the fact that bad things happen not by God's will but because that is the nature of the world. What we have seen throughout this pandemic is how God has worked through so many people in the NHS and care sector, in food banks and social support groups, through key-workers and random acts of kindness. As Paul wrote in Romans chapter eight, **'We know that in everything God works all things together for good to those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.'** Don't involve yourself in the blame-game. Instead, let us rekindle the flame of Methodism by looking outward, not inward, seeking to meet the needs of people broken by the physical, mental, economic and spiritual effects of coronavirus. Remember, when Christ hung on the cross, he looked out at the world which had come to save and, even as he was dying, his concern was for the penitent criminal and his mother.

The best, most eloquent preaching won't bring people back to the church; nor provocative advertisements or slogans. We are the best – or worst - advertisements for our faith, for what really matters is how we act towards and care for others – seeking their wellbeing, as Jesus did in his ministry. We must let Christ's love shine through our lives, for if we show we're different, others may want to know what makes us special and that will provide opportunities to pass on the gospel message. Best of all, God, the

Holy Spirit is always with us, especially when discipleship seems daunting. Isaiah was absolutely correct when he said, “Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak”. Let’s outface an unbelieving world, renewed by the Spirit and strengthened by our faith in our amazing, everlasting God. Amen.

“We have no mission but to serve / In full obedience to our Lord: / To care for all, without reserve, / And spread his liberating Word.” We close our worship with 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.**

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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.