

Call to Worship: Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3

Happy are those who reject the advice of evil people, who do not follow the example of sinners or join those who have no use for God. Instead, they find joy in obeying the Law of the LORD, and they study it day and night. They are like trees that grow beside a stream, that bear fruit at the right time, and whose leaves do not dry up. They succeed in everything they do. 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.' 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 pray.

Almighty God, we have come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. Your wisdom and power are as unfathomable and boundless as is your love for flawed and fallen humanity. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you not only broke the power of death, but reconciled us to you, undeserving as we are.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you bought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break Satan's hold on us and to atone for the sins of the whole world. You are the source of eternal life through faith in you.

Holy Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide, we know you are the Lord's gift to help our discipleship and that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into our service to you and our neighbours. Fill us with your love and help us fulfil our calling.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. We ask you to hear and accept our praise and worship today. **Amen.**

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Lord, in your mercy', please respond with, 'hear our prayer'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for challenges and opportunities that test and develop our character; for everyone who guides, inspires and loves us, but most of all for your undying love, even in times when we are loveless and faithless. Merciful Lord, forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving or judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Help us to change our ways as we reflect upon and acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives bear good news to our neighbours. Re-kindle the embers of our faith, to a holy flame, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here in spirit, love and truth.

'Lord, in your mercy',, 'hear our prayer'.

Loving God, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only pardoned us, but invite us to walk with you once more, free from the burden of our sins. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives bring you honour in Jesus' beautiful name. 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 was written in June 1966 by a former West Yorkshire school teacher, Rosamond Herklots, whilst she was digging out weeds in her nephew's

garden. It shows that the Holy Spirit can talk to us anywhere and any-time. 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 are owed to us,
How great our debt to you!

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

© Rosamond E. Herklots (1905 – 1987)

We shall now bring our concerns for other people, nearby and far away, to the Lord our God.

Loving God, although we live on a wonderful and self-sustaining planet, the news Media speaks of its brokenness and is often so gloomy it daunts our spirits. Nevertheless, we believe that all things are possible for you, so whilst we offer ourselves to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of our neighbours, we turn to you in situations that are beyond our power, asking that you will reach out in mercy to heal our world.

Author of peace and Lord of all, hear our prayer for the leaders of the nations of the world. Warm their hearts and inspire them to govern with mercy and justice. Teach them to negotiate when disputes arise and to compromise in order to avoid warfare. It is heart-breaking to see reports about the injuries, deaths, deprivation and destruction in Ukraine and the Holy Land which falls very short of its title because of the continued holding of hostages and the appalling conditions imposed upon ordinary Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank, so we pray for a just ending to the fighting in those lands. We pray for an end to strife in other countries, too, including Congo, Sudan and Somalia. Lord, so much needs to be done, but let peace begin in our own hearts, in the way we treat our neighbours.

Heavenly Father, we pray for victims of global warming, where strong storms, floods, drought and wildfires are wreaking great destruction. Help all humankind to take greater care of this planet over which we have been made stewards. Let us waste less, recycle more, pollute less and use only the resources we need, so that future generations inherit a healthier planet.

Lord of shalom, we remember neighbours who are sick, in body, mind or spirit, for those who are in any kind of need, or trouble, for neighbours who are lonely or who have lost someone dear. In a time of silence, we name people about whom we are especially concerned, confident that you will understand their need and will reach out to them.....

Heavenly Father, may we offer practical support wherever possible to those for whom we pray, but we ask that you will enfold them with your love, offering healing, hope, renewed strength, courage and, not least of all, lasting peace.

Holy God, we offer our prayer for our church here at Woodside, other churches in our Circuit and in neighbouring Circuits and also the Church throughout the world. Unite us in Spirit, love and truth. Teach us to work together and give us the courage to bring good news to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world which desperately needs good news.

Abba, heavenly Father, bless us, our families and friends. Keep us safe in your care and help us lead Christ-centred lives by sharing the abundance of your love with both friend and stranger, in Jesus' lovely name. Amen.

Our lesson is Paul's Letter to Philemon verses 1 to 21

From Paul, a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy—To our friend and fellow-worker Philemon, and the church that meets in your house, and our sister Apphia, and our fellow-soldier Archippus: May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

Brother Philemon, every time I pray, I mention you and give thanks to my God. For I hear of your love for all God's people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. My prayer is that our fellowship with you as believers will bring about a deeper understanding of every blessing which we have in our life in union with Christ. Your love, dear brother, has brought me great joy and much encouragement! You have cheered the hearts of all God's people.

For this reason, I could be bold enough, as your brother in Christ, to order you to do what should be done. But because I love you, I make a request instead. I do this even though I am Paul, the ambassador of Christ Jesus, and at present also a prisoner for his sake. So I make a request to you on behalf of Onesimus, who is my own son in Christ; for while in prison I have become his spiritual father. At one time he was of no use to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him back to you now, and with him goes my heart. I would like to keep him here with me, while I am in prison for the gospel's sake, so that he could help me in your place. However, I do not want to force you to help me; rather, I would like you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do anything unless you agree.

It may be that Onesimus was away from you for a short time so that you might have him back for all time. And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. How much he means to me! And how much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord! So, if you think of me as your partner, welcome him back just as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to my account. Here, I will write this with my own hand: I, Paul, will pay you back. (I should not have to remind you, of course, that you owe your very self to me.) So, my brother, please do me this favour for the Lord's sake; as a brother in Christ, cheer me up!

I am sure, as I write this, that you will do what I ask—in fact I know that you will do even more. At the same time, get a room ready for me, because I hope that God will answer the prayers of all of you and give me back to you. Amen.

We shall continue our Lord as we sing a hymn written by Welshman Noel Richards and his wife, Tricia. When he was in his mid-teens, Noel went to the Colston Hall, Bristol for a concert called "It's Buzz", at which twenty-one-year-old Graham Kendrick performed some of his hymns and worship songs and it was Graham Kendrick who inspired Noel to follow him into writing and composing for the Lord. He first met Tricia in Plymouth in 1975 when he was working for

“Youth for Christ” and they married three years later. We shall sing hymn number 430, ‘My lips shall praise you,’

My lips shall praise you,

My great Redeemer;

My heart will worship

Almighty Saviour.

**1. You take all my guilt away,
Turn the darkest night to brightest day,
You are the restorer of my soul. (Chorus)**

**2. Love that conquers every fear,
In the midst of trouble you draw near,
You are the restorer of my soul. (Chorus)**

**3. You're the source of happiness,
Bringing peace when I am in distress,
You are the restorer of my soul. (Chorus)** © Noel Richards (1955) Tricia Richards (1960)

Sermon: *‘Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.’ Philemon v. 11*

It is tempting to think that Paul’s letter to Philemon is a straightforward, reasonable request that Paul’s friend would have no difficulty acceding to. However, when we look into the background of the story, Philemon was being asked a very big favour indeed, which is why Paul structured his letter in such a way that it put Philemon under great moral pressure to act against his conscience, for slavery was an accepted part of life in the Roman Empire and Paul did not challenge it, contrary to remarks in one of my commentaries. Indeed, the Roman way of life depended upon slaves, just as we depend on household appliances and computerised machinery today, whereas when my mother was a girl, most houses had floors that needed to be swept, grates that needed to be black-leaded, doorsteps that had to be stoned white and washing done in a copper before being run through a mangle and hung out to dry! It is estimated that there were sixty million slaves in the Empire when Paul wrote this letter – half the population.

In order that the middle and upper classes of society could enjoy life, slaves were controlled with considerable rigour, even cruelty: they had no rights; answering back or disobedience would invariably result in a flogging; a repeat of the offence could result in the slave’s face being branded with a red-hot iron, or their being imprisoned. A slave who stole from his or her master, or who ran away, would usually be put to death, often by crucifixion, as a deterrent to other slaves. Slave owners were expected to show solidarity, so a hard line was demanded of them all, if a slave broke any rule.

St. Paul’s letter is remarkable, not least because he spoke up for Onesimus, Philemon’s slave, who had not only absconded, but Onesimus had probably taken either money, or property before fleeing, for verse 18 says, **‘If he has done you wrong, or owes you anything, charge it to me’**. It is fair to deduce that the slave was not only a runaway, but a thief as well. Imagine the position in which Paul’s request put Philemon, who had lost a slave and, in all probability, money or property, yet who was asked not to punish him. **Indeed, Paul made so bold as to ask that Onesimus should be given his freedom.** Imagine what the other slave owners would have felt about rewarding a slave for absconding and theft by making him a free man! We need to bear in mind that **Philemon lived in Colossae**, a city noted for its cloth-production, especially a dark red woollen cloth known as **Colossinum**, so slaves would have been

a vital part of the economy and keeping them in order would have been a major preoccupation of the upper and middle classes, so Philemon stood to lose more than his slave if he agreed to Paul's request, yet we have no reason to think that he denied his friend.

The letter began with a greeting to Philemon, his **wife Apphia** – who would have had direct control over the house slaves – and Philemon's house church, thanking and praising him for his love and faith through Christ Jesus, that had refreshed and strengthened his fellow Christians. Then, rather than using his authority as the one who had brought Philemon to Christ, Paul pleaded with his friend as a prisoner, not only of Rome, but of obedience to Christ, in whose name he was making his appeal, not on his own account. It is most likely that Onesimus had sought refuge with Paul at **Ephesus**, or had gone to see Paul on an errand and overstayed, but during that time he had been converted by Paul and had been transformed from a useless slave, (**Onesimus means useful in Greek, whilst Onedismus means reviled**), to somebody vital and good.

Paul declared that he was sending Onesimus back to his master, trusting that he would receive grace – undeserved kindness – but by doing so he gave the slave an opportunity to show how he had been changed, for by returning voluntarily, Onesimus might have been going to his death – literally carrying his cross. But he was also doing what is called for from all sinners, turning from wrongdoing back towards the Lord. **After all, the cry of Old Testament prophets was shub! – turn round and return to the Lord!** Paul's Letter to Philemon is more than a request on behalf of an errant slave: it speaks of Jesus' transforming, redemptive, generous love, for both Philemon and Onesimus were changed; it speaks of the need to turn from the wrong path, that is to repent, but most of all it speaks of the need to forgive, to show the kind of grace that we all need from God.

We, too have been released from our enslavement, but at what a cost, for although St. Paul promised to repay Philemon for losses incurred by his slave, God's own Son paid for our sins on a cross at Calvary. And not just our sins, but all people who repent in Jesus' name are promised forgiveness. Faced with the knowledge of the willingness of God to forgive our sins, how could Philemon fail to accede to Paul's letter, even if it incurred the wrath, or disdain of fellow slave-owners!

In addition, Paul's letter proclaims the fellowship of all Christians, irrespective of status, gender, age, disability, race, colour, or anything else. He wrote these lines to the Colossians: **'Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all'**. Today, let us remember that it is only two hundred years since the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire, yet many people from the Commonwealth still do not receive equal treatment, especially in educational and employment opportunities, whilst in many parts of the world children work long hours for less than two dollars a day – often in dangerous conditions – as bonded labourers, producing goods like footballs, sweaters and T-shirts which are sold at high prices in the United Kingdom and Europe. Worse still, there have been several exposes of modern-day slavery in this country, ranging from agricultural gang masters, the sex trade and hand car washes centres. These exploit and abuse vulnerable members of society: the young; East Europeans and especially trafficked or illegal immigrants.

The Letter to Philemon tells us that everybody is of inestimable value to God, for Jesus gave his life for all people, not just an exclusive group. We are challenged, therefore, to stand up against trade injustice, modern slavery, against child-labour in the Developing World and any kind of prejudice, not because we want to play at being

politically correct, but because this is the cross we are called to carry for Christ. Inevitably, we will face opposition from those who will argue that **‘this is the way of the world’**, or **‘without cheap labour, the economic system will collapse.’** Interestingly, this was precisely the argument used by slave owners at the time of William Wilberforce, Granville Sharp and John Newton, and also by those who opposed the 1860 Factory Act that Lord Shaftesbury pushed through Parliament to end child labour in the U.K.. It wasn’t true then and it isn’t now! Let us display the same steadfast integrity as Granville Sharp, William Wilberforce, John Newton and Lord Shaftesbury in opposing evil in our world and may our obedience to Christ Jesus make us useful to him and to our neighbours – nearby and far away. Amen.

Our closing hymn is Charles Wesley’s ‘Give me the faith which can remove’ which was written in 1749, when he was suffering with depression. Originally, it was a lament, but his older brother, John, struck out two verses to leave us with a classic Wesley hymn. We sing hymn number 661.

**1. Give me the faith which can remove
And sink the mountain to a plain;
Give me the child-like praying love,
Which longs to build thy house again;
Thy love, let it my heart o’erpower,
And all my simple soul devour.**

**2. I would the precious time redeem,
And longer live for this alone;
To spend, and to be spent, for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known;
Fully on these my mission prove,
And only breathe, to breathe thy love.**

**3. My talents, gifts, and graces, Lord,
Into thy blessed hands receive;
And let me live to preach thy word,
And let me to thy glory live;
My every sacred moment spend
In publishing the sinners’ friend.**

**4. Enlarge, inflame, and fill my heart
With boundless charity divine;
So shall I all my strength exert,
And love them with a zeal like thine;
And lead them to thy open side,
The sheep for whom their Shepherd died.**

© Charles Wesley {1707 – 1788}

Benediction

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