

A service for 8th October, 2023 (HP)

Call to Worship: Psalm 118 verses 22 to 24

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the LORD has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.

We echo the Psalmist's bidding to rejoice as we sing hymn number 578, 'This is the day', to a Fijian folk melody.

**1. This is the day,
This is the day that the Lord has made,
That the Lord has made.
We will rejoice,
We will rejoice and be glad in it,
And be glad in it.
This is the day that the Lord has made;
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day,
This is the day that the Lord has made.**

**2. This is the day,
This is the day when he rose again,
When he rose again.
We will rejoice,
We will rejoice and be glad in it,
And be glad in it.
This is the day when he rose again;
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day,
This is the day when he rose again.**

**3. This is the day,
This is the day when the Spirit came,
When the Spirit came,
We will rejoice,
We will rejoice and be glad in it,
And be glad in it.
This is the day when the Spirit came;
We will rejoice and be glad in it.
This is the day,
This is the day when the Spirit came.** *Anonymous (Fiji Island folk melody)*

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

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 praise and glory are yours forever.

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. We thank you for the honour bestowed on us.

Almighty God **all praise and glory are yours forever.**

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 crucifixion and resurrection, our Lord Jesus broke the power of sin and death and offers us everlasting life through faith in him.

Almighty God **all praise and glory are yours forever.**

Loving Heavenly Father, you call us to be your earthly sons and daughters, a holy priesthood in an everlasting covenant fulfilled by your Son, our Saviour. Therefore, as we come to worship you today, take away all anxieties and distractions, so we may worship you in love, spirit and truth. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

In our prayer of confession, when I say 'Gracious God', please respond with, 'have mercy on us'.

Heavenly Father, we offer heartfelt thanks for the many blessings we have received from you: our lives; homes, friends and family, things we enjoy and experiences that have fulfilled us. Most of all, thank you for loving us even when we are disobedient, loveless and unlovable.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Lord, pardon us when we don't love our neighbours as we love ourselves and do not love and serve you wholeheartedly, as we know we should. In Jesus' precious name, help us to change our ways, O Lord. Forgive us for sins we have committed and for the good we have neglected to do.

Gracious God, **have mercy on us.**

Merciful Lord, we believe that you have heard our prayer and have not only forgiven us but call us to follow you once again without the burden of guilt to hold us back. May we serve you in the power of the Holy Spirit, so that, by caring for 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.

Our second hymn was written in 1974 by Bryn Rees, a Congregational Minister who served mainly in Eastern and South Eastern England. It has four common settings, which makes it an organist's nightmare. However, the melody 'Tetherdown' was composed by Gerald Barnes, the organist at Tetherdown URC, in Muswell Hill, London, when Revd. Rees was minister. We shall sing hymn number 139, 'The kingdom of God is justice and joy,'

**1. The kingdom of God is justice and joy,
For Jesus restores what sin would destroy;
God's power and glory in Jesus we know,
And here and hereafter the kingdom shall grow.**

**2. The kingdom of God is mercy and grace,
The lepers are cleansed, the sinners find place,**

The outcast are welcomed God's banquet to share,
And hope is awakened in place of despair.

3. The kingdom of God is challenge and choice,
Believe the Good News, repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners brought Christ to his cross,
Our crisis of judgement for gain or for loss.

4. The kingdom is come, the gift and the goal,
In Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
The heirs of the kingdom shall answer his call,
And all things cry glory to God all in all!

© Bryn Rees {1911 – 1983}

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'.

Heavenly Father, help us to 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 there are circumstances where we know the best we can offer is not enough, so we turn to you, for to you all things are possible.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

Faithful God, hear our prayer for this church, the churches in our Circuit, the presbyters, local preachers, worship leaders, administrators and those who hold responsibilities in our churches. Grant them the spiritual grace, energy, compassion, courage and vision to lead where you want the Church to go. May we proclaim good news boldly and find new ways of engaging our community.

'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 seek justice and mercy in their dealings. Help us stand up against poverty, here and abroad, to 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'**.

Lord of creation, we confess that we have failed our collective responsibility to be stewards of our planet and the evidence is before our eyes: melting glaciers; 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.

Remember in your mercy victims of disasters and famines, thinking in particular of those affected by the recent earthquake in Morocco and the collapse of two dams in Libya. Bless the work done by relief workers and charities like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid.

'Your kingdom come', **'Your will be done'**.

God of love, truth and justice, hear our cry of grief for the 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, of healing and well-being, let the light of your love shine upon people who suffer from sickness, grief or trouble, as well as everyone who mourns the loss of a loved one. In a time of silence, we pray for 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 them practical support and friendship and may you embrace them in your love, which offers healing, courage, hope, strength and transcending peace.

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

Lord of all, hear our prayer for peace throughout the world, particularly in Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan and for peace between Jews and Palestinians in Jerusalem. 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’**.

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 take the light of the gospel to a sceptical and sometimes hostile world. In Jesus’ holy name. Amen.

Our Gospel reading is Matthew chapter 21 verses 33 to 46

Jesus said,

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey.

When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them.

‘They will respect my son,’ he said.

But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants? “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end,” they replied, “and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time.”

Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the Scriptures: ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eyes’? Therefore, I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. He who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed.”

When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus’ parables, they knew he was talking about them. They looked for a way to arrest him, but they were afraid of the crowd because the people held that he was a prophet. Amen.

The writer of our penultimate hymn, Revd. Harry Fosdick, was a Baptist Pastor in the USA. After a variety of pastoral and academic appointments and a spell in broadcasting, his final church was the Riverside Church, funded by John D. Rockefeller and built at his insistence in an impoverished part of New York. This hymn was written for its dedication service in 1930. Hymn number 712, ‘God of grace and God of glory,’

1. God of grace and God of glory,

On thy people pour thy power;
Crown thine ancient church's story;
Bring her bud to glorious flower.
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
For the facing of this hour.

2. Heal thy children's warring madness;
Bend our pride to thy control;
Shame our wanton, selfish gladness,
Rich in things and poor in soul,
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
Lest we miss thy kingdom's goal.

3. Lo, the hosts of evil round us
Scorn thy Christ, assail his ways!
Fears and doubts too long have bound us;
Free our hearts to work and praise.
Grant us wisdom,
Grant us courage,
For the living of these days.

© H.E. Fosdick (1878 – 1969)

Sermon: *"The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all."* Mtt 21:42
It is very easy to accept the parable of the tenants in the vineyard as a condemnation of the chief priests and Pharisees, who were rejecting Jesus' Good News, because their forefathers had also rejected God's call to be his holy people. However, this teaching is as relevant in the Twenty-First Century as it was in the First. Let us begin by looking at the points Jesus was making in the parable.

He based his parable upon the first Isaiah's, "Song of the Vineyard", in which the prophet described how hard a friend worked upon his vineyard, digging the soil, removing the stones, planting only the finest vines, building a watch tower to protect the vineyard and, finally, digging a pit in which the ripe grapes could be pressed to make fine wine. Alas, his efforts were in vain, for the vines only produced sour grapes. As a result, the owner abandoned it and cursed it. Isaiah, of course, was warning Judeans of the disaster that was imminent – defeat and exile at the hands of the Babylonians – because of the country's failure to honour its covenant with God. The song's imagery pointed out how much God had invested in his chosen people, giving them the promised land, delivering them from their enemies, providing all they needed to prosper and only requiring the people faithfully honour the covenant he had made with them. Yet Isaiah decried their faithlessness: **'Israel is the vineyard of the Lord Almighty; the people of Judah are the vines he planted. He expected them to do what was good, but instead they committed murder. He expected them to do what was right, but their victims cried out for justice.'** The victims were not Gentiles, but their own poor, who the wealthy oppressed and even cheated them of their land.

Notice how Jesus used Isaiah's imagery, then developed it to show how the vineyard owner's slaves were abused, beaten, even killed, by the rebellious tenants. The slaves represented the prophets, some of whom were abused as badly as, or even worse than Jeremiah, who was beaten, set in the stocks and later thrown into a mud-filled cistern. The prophets' 'offence' was to call the Jews to repentance, which means doing more than merely saying they were sorry. The prophets' cry of, **'SHUB'**, means to

return to God, to turn 180 degrees from sin, back towards the Lord. Repentance means turning away from sin and to observe the covenant made with the Lord.

Jesus continued by relating how the vineyard owner sent his son to collect what was owed by the tenants, generously attributing the mistreatment of the slaves to the tenants' failure to recognise from whom they had been sent and expecting them to respect the son for who he was. However, instead, they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him, so they might seize his inheritance. In other words, Christ spoke of his own passion and death at Calvary as a direct, wilful act of the Jewish Establishment, which defied God and denied him what was owed: obedience, love and faith.

By quoting **Psalms 118**, "**The stone which the builders rejected as worthless turned out to be the most important of all**," Jesus warned the chief priests and Pharisees of the terrible mistake they were about to make, saying that, as they had failed to bear '**proper fruits**', God was going to open his kingdom to people who would obey him. Had it not been for their fear of the Passover crowds, Christ's enemies would have arrested him then and there, but they chose to bide their time. They were too proud and thought they had too much to lose to repent and seek God's ways.

Do we really appreciate how much God has done for us – and is still doing? Think of this world, of its intricate beauty, its ability to sustain life, despite mankind's exploitation and pollution of its resources. Consider how the Lord reaches out to draw us into a close relationship with him; how when our forefathers failed to listen to the prophets, God sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, to share our lives, to die to redeem us from sin and to be raised from death to offer us new life at the end of our mortal lives. He lives in us as the Holy Spirit, who strengthens and guides us when we let him. Oh yes, as Isaac Watts expressed it, '**Were the whole realm of nature mine, / That were an offering far too small; / Love, so amazing, so divine, / Demands my soul, my life, my all.**'

Our reading challenges us to question how we use our gifts from God. Do our lives honour Jesus? Do our actions match our words, or are we merely lip-service Christians? Do we honour Christ's Greatest Commandment? **Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.** The second is this: **'Love your neighbour as yourself.'**

Although the war in Ukraine could have serious consequences for the world, the effects of COVID 19 have changed the world. Many people, here and abroad are experiencing heart-breaking difficulties: loss of work; poverty; broken health arising from long-COVID; failed relationships; anxiety and depression; the effects of isolation and a sense of powerlessness. All of these need to be addressed and though we know we can't put everything right on our own, we need to explore ways where we can help, however small a part we can play – and then act as individuals or, better still as a church to heal some of the brokenness around us by making ourselves available to listen and supporting organisations and agencies that are offering practical support.

Putting matters right in our country is such a challenge that we may be tempted to forget the Developing World. It is true that the financial crises of 2008 and last year have made it difficult to honour the Millennium Pledge, but it ought not to be a permanent excuse to abandon our poorer brothers and sisters. After all, the legacies of our failure will be: most children in the Developing Nations will receive little or no education; many will begin work at five or six years old; the sick won't be able to afford to see a doctor, let alone buy medicines and many won't even have one meal a day. **If**

we turn our back on such suffering, are we any better than the tenants in the vineyard, who refused to honour the owner's son? Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Canon Edward Burns in response to a diocesan challenge during 1961 and it is a challenge to all Christians. Let us raise our voices as we sing hymn number 465, 'We have a gospel to proclaim,'

**1. We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his story, tell his worth.**

**2. Tell of his birth at Bethlehem –
Not in a royal house or hall,
But in a stable, dark and dim,
The Word made flesh, a light for all.**

**3. Tell of his death at Calvary:
Hated by those he came to save,
In lonely suffering on the cross,
For all he loved his life he gave.**

**4. Tell of that glorious Easter morn;
Empty the tomb, for he was free.
He broke the power of death and hell
That we might share his victory.**

**5. Tell of his reign at God's right hand,
By all creation glorified.
He sends his Spirit on his church
To live for him, the Lamb who died.**

**6. Now we rejoice to name him King:
Jesus is Lord of all the earth.
This gospel message we proclaim:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.**

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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 forever more. Amen.