

A Service for 9th October, 2022 (StF)

Call to Worship: Psalm 111 verses 1 to 3

Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. Amen.

Our first hymn was written by Revd. Fred Pratt Green, at the invitation of a Methodist church in Texas, for the final service of a festival centred around worship, the arts and music in 1978. The dedication of a communion table, font and lectern was to be made during that service. The church wanted the hymn set to 'Abbots Leigh', but "Singing the Faith" uses Henry Smart's 'Bethany'. Hymn number 25, 'God is here! As we his people'.

1. God is here! As we his people

Meet to offer praise and prayer,

May we find in fuller measure

What it is in Christ we share.

Here, as in the world around us,

All our varied skills and arts

Wait the coming of the Spirit

Into open minds and hearts.

2. Here are symbols to remind us

Of our lifelong need of grace;

Here are table, font and pulpit;

Here the cross has central place.

Here in honesty of preaching,

Here in silence, as in speech,

Here in newness and renewal,

God the Spirit comes to each.

3. Here our children find a welcome

In the Shepherd's flock and fold:

Here as bread and wine are taken,

Christ sustains us, as of old.

Here the servants of the Servant

Seek in worship to explore

What it means in daily living

To believe and to adore.

4. Lord of all, of Church and Kingdom,

In an age of change and doubt,

Keep us faithful to the gospel,

Help us work your purpose out.

Here, in this day's dedication,

All we have to give, receive:

We, who cannot live without you,

We adore you! We believe!

© Fred Pratt Green (1903 – 2000)

Let us pray.

Word of life, you brought our universe into being and sustain it with your love. Your glory is revealed both in the vastness of space with its myriad suns, planets and moons,

besides the beauty and complexity of life on this planet. In the light of your wisdom, might and holiness, we are amazed that you care for flawed human beings so much that you took human form and lived among us as Christ Jesus, revealing your boundless love by his life, death and resurrection. Amazing God, take away all anxieties and distractions so we can pray to you in faith, sing our hymns of praise joyfully and both understand and respond to your holy word. All honour and glory, power and praise be yours now and forevermore. Amen.

In our prayer of thanksgiving, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond, 'Forgive and restore us'. Let us pray.

Lord, our Good Shepherd, you bless us day by day with good things to enjoy, with opportunities and experiences that warm our heart. You bring us safely through trials and temptations and you guide and protect us. You are truly amazing and we rejoice to be part of your flock.

However, like sheep we confess that we have strayed from the path you want us to follow: we ignore your calls and go our own way. We are often selfish and self-centred, ignoring the needs of our neighbours; we give way to anger and prejudice, saying things that hurt and offend other people. As we reflect on these things

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Like sheep, we find ourselves in barren places because of our pride and greed. We take more than we need and will not share what we don't want. We are loveless and unlovable, lost and ashamed.....

Merciful Lord *Forgive and restore us*

Loving, faithful God, you hear and answer our prayers. You seek us out and carry us home to the path of righteousness, rejoicing that we can journey with you once more. Help us to centre our lives on Christ and to lead lives of loving service in his precious 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.

Charlotte Elliott was of a remarkable breed of Victorian women, who spent from 1821 until 1871 virtually house-bound, yet wielded great influence from her sick-bed. In 1831, Rev. Henry Elliott, Charlotte's brother enlisted the help of the household to run a bazaar to raise funds for his school at St. Mary's for the daughters of impoverished clergymen. Everybody except Charlotte, threw themselves into the task with enthusiasm, but it was a time when she was feeling particularly weak - physically, not mentally. Thus frustrated, she found herself unable to sleep as she wondered about her spiritual condition. However, the following day, she wrote our next hymn by considering her own weakness and unworthiness in the light of Jesus' love and offer of salvation. Her sister-in-law saw the sheet and asked if she might have a copy. The rest is really history. Hymn number 556, 'Just as I am, without one plea'

**1. Just as I am, without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me,
And that thou bidd'st me come to thee,**

O Lamb of God, I come!

2. Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears, within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come!

3. Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need, in thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come!

4. Just as I am, thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come!

5. Just as I am – thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down –
Now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come!

6. Just as I am, of that free love
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above,
O Lamb of God, I come!

© Charlotte Elliott {1789 – 1871}

We shall now bring our concerns for other people to the Lord our God. It is based on hymn 629 by Colin Fergusson. Let us pray.

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. Lord, we see so much suffering around us, much of which is the result of human greed, pride, foolishness and indifference. Where we are able, use us as your earthly hands. Grant us compassion, courage, wisdom and steadfastness when we serve others in Jesus' name, but where we can't change the world, we ask you to do so, for all things are possible to you.

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. Gracious God, hear our prayer for an end to wars and strife which mar so many countries around the world, especially conflicts between Palestinians and Jews in Jerusalem, civil strife in Iran and the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. Guide the leaders of all nations to seek justice and mercy through which lasting peace can be achieved.

God of my joy, I offer you my grief, when I sink down in sadness or despair. I pray in all my depths to find you there. Generous God, we pray for organizations like the Disasters Emergency Committee, All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to famine-stricken countries like Afghanistan and especially those in the horn of Africa. We pray for the victims of floods in Pakistan and of hurricanes in Cuba and Florida, that they may receive speedy help.

We pray, too, for people in this country who are struggling to live as the cost of energy, fuel and food increases to record levels and we thank you for food banks and for other organisations which help the poor. Nevertheless, may the Government and other agencies, including the Church find ways of helping all who are finding it difficult to manage.

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. Lord of healing and wellbeing, hear our prayer for neighbours who are ill, or in any kind of need or trouble. Remember neighbours who living with anxiety or depression, or whose relationships have broken down and, particularly, all who mourn the loss of somebody dear. Help us to support them, but embrace them with your love, so they are healed, comforted, encouraged and blessed with peace.

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. 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 help us to realise our dreams of reviving our ministries to our communities, of meeting some of our neighbours' needs and offering not only healing but evidence of Christ's love for all-comers. Help us 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 Luke chapter 17 verses 11 to 19

Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well." Amen.

We shall sing a hymn by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community. Many of their hymns are set to Scots ballad melodies and this is no exception, for it is sung to 'Ye banks and braes o' bonny Doon'. Hymn number 655, 'We cannot measure how you heal'.

**1. We cannot measure how you heal
Or answer every sufferer's prayer,
Yet we believe your grace responds
Where faith and doubt unite to care.
Your hands, though bloodied on the cross,
Survive to hold and heal and warn,
To carry all through death to life
And cradle children yet unborn.**

**2. The pain that will not go away,
The guilt that clings from things long past,
The fear of what the future holds,
Are present as if meant to last.
But present, too, is love which tends**

The hurt we never hoped to find,
The private agonies inside,
The memories that haunt the mind.

3. So some have come who need your help
And some have come to make amends
As hands which shaped and saved the world
Are present in the touch of friends.
Lord, let your Spirit meet us here
To mend the body, mind and soul,
To disentangle peace from pain
And make your broken people whole.

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

Sermon: “Rise and go; your faith has made you well.” Luke 17:19

Despite widely published reports of some erratic aspects of the Princess Diana’s life, I have an abiding memory of her greeting and hugging AIDs victims at a time when everyone was terrified that any contact might result in infection and those acts of loving-kindness make up for any of her faults. After all, in most respects people who live with HIV / AIDs are still, in effect, the lepers of the Twenty-First Century.

Luke reading deals with Jesus healing ten lepers somewhere between the borders of Galilee and Samaria. At those times, leprosy could mean skin complaints rather than the disease we call leprosy. Nevertheless, those afflicted were condemned as unclean, forced to live apart from others in their community and were not allowed even to travel on the roadway, where they might meet clean people. They had to shout warnings to anyone passing closely, could have no contact with non-lepers and were barred from any kind of synagogue or temple worship in Judea.

When Jesus encountered the ten lepers, he seemed not to have noticed them as they stood at a distance and asked him to take pity on them. The Hebrew word they would have used is **raham**, which has its equivalent in the Greek **agape**. As well as pity, both mean boundless, everlasting love – effectively the love of God. When he heard their pleas, he did not reach out to heal them, but told them, “**Go and let the priests examine you.**” By doing so, Jesus challenged their faith, for there was no obvious healing until they set out to find a priest, who could declare them clean. Had they not been free of their skin complaints when they arrived before the priest, they would have been in serious trouble, so the ten must have trusted the Lord and, because of their faith, they were healed. It is noteworthy that in this instance of healing Jesus did not physically handle the lepers. Instead, each was healed by faithfully doing what he was told. It may remind us of how Naaman was healed when he obeyed Elisha without the prophet even coming to the door of his house, let alone touching him. Instead, he directed a servant to tell Naaman to bathe in the River Jordan. Naaman obeyed and was healed.

It is clear from Luke’s account that Jesus did not discriminate between the lepers, for one of them was a Samaritan, a traditional enemy of Jews. Samaritans would spit whenever they used the word ‘**Jew**’, whilst a Jew would consider himself or herself made ceremonially unclean if even the shadow of a Samaritan fell across them. Nevertheless, Jesus healed all of them. It is also worth noting that the nine Jews, in their degradation and misery, accepted their fellow-sufferer, irrespective of his origins, yet the Samaritan was doubly despised by Jewish society: both as a leper and because of his nationality. He was at the very bottom of the social heap. However, even before

he reached the priest, the Samaritan believed that he was healed and he was the only one to return to Jesus.

Notice the Lord's surprise that only the Samaritan came back to praise God, so he sent the man on his way with the blessing, **"Get up and go, your faith has made you well."** In other words, **the Samaritan was restored to spiritual as well as physical wholeness.**

Both stories show God's grace extended not only to foreigners, but to traditional enemies, too. Moreover, the Samaritan was made whole in body, had his faith restored and gave thanks to God. Interestingly, the chosen people, the nine leprosy Jews, went on their way without a thought of thanking Jesus, or of praising God. You could argue that they took God's **raham**, his **loving-kindness**, for granted, but whilst it is correct to presume that God is love, no one likes to be taken for granted. Just as taking a wife, or husband for granted is an effective way of ensuring that there will be strife in that marriage, so taking God for granted will weaken our relationship with him. Never be sparing with praise and thanks for the good things God does, because our prayers of gratitude are just as important as our prayers for help and guidance.

One of today's greatest challenges is still the prevalence of COVID and AIDs / HIV amongst the Developing Nations, partly because modern drugs seem to have contained the disease in the wealthy Northern Hemisphere. However, it is now estimated that in Southern Africa one person in four is infected with HIV/AIDs – generally through heterosexual, not homosexual, activity. As a result, the average life expectancy in South Africa is thirty-eight. Worse still, most of the victims are between sixteen and forty when most people usually are at work, developing the economy. HIV / AIDs has brought several countries to the brink of social and economic disaster. Of course, in addition there is the threat of new strains of COVID19 evolving in the Third World, because most of those countries still don't have sufficient vaccines – and those new strains can affect us, too.

Whilst it may be true, that we may be preoccupied with inflation and the rising costs of food, fuel and energy – and we must look to the needs of the vulnerable among us – the economic hardships we face are nothing compared with the grinding poverty and needs of the Developing World. We are like Jesus' disciples, who heard the lepers' appeal for him to take pity on them. Let us support any action, such as striving for the provision of cheap retroviral drugs and COVID vaccines to protect them, or for the cancellation of debts so massive that poor nations cannot even repay the interest.

May Christ help us to see our neighbours as individuals like us with needs, irrespective of their faith, colour, gender, or politics, just as Jesus saw the need in that Samaritan. In the same way as he healed a traditional foe, because of his physical condition which separated him from his friends and family, so Jesus died at Calvary, for our spiritual condition – our sinfulness – which separated us from a right relationship with God the Father. Christ died to offer everybody salvation through faith. Lord, grant us the faith to show our neighbours the same kind of love, for if they can see Jesus' grace shining through our words and deeds, trust among them and us can be cemented, new relationships formed and God glorified. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written by Marjorie Dobson, a Methodist local preacher, who came from Country Durham. She was born in 1940 and became a local preacher when she was twenty. Her writings reflect her concern for those who feel disconnected from faith by their image of the church as being outdated and irrelevant in the Twenty-First Century. Reflect on her words and consider how we

can serve our communities as the pandemic morphs into endemic and we learn to live with coronavirus and its consequences. Hymn number 664, 'Lord, you call us to your service'. Hopefully, we shall sing it to 'Angel voices'.

**1. Lord, you call us to your service,
Each in our own way.
Some to loving, caring, healing;
Some to preach, or pray;
Some to work with quiet learning,
Truth discerning,
Day by day.**

**2. Life for us is always changing
In the work we share.
Christian love adds new dimensions
To the way we care.
For we know that you could lead us,
As you need us,
Anywhere.**

**3. Seeing life from your perspective
Makes your challenge plain,
As your heart is grieving over
Those who live in pain.
Teach us how, by our compassion,
You may fashion
Hope again.**

**4. Lord, we set our human limits
On the work we do.
Send us your directing Spirit,
Pour your power through,
That we may be free in living
And in giving
All for you.**

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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.