

A service for Ascensiontide – 29th May, 2022 (StF)

Call to worship: Psalm 1 verses 1 to 3

Blessed are people who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers. Amen.

Our opening hymn was written by Caroline Maria Noel, a daughter of an Anglican priest, who suffered from ill-health for most of her life and who wrote a number of hymns to encourage others who were ill. Published in 1870, it was intended to be a processional hymn for Ascension Day. It is based upon Philippians chapter 2 and has a choice of three set tunes. We shall sing hymn number 317, 'At the name of Jesus'.

1. At the name of Jesus

Every knee shall bow,
Every tongue confess him
King of glory now.

'Tis the Father's pleasure
We should call him Lord,
Who from the beginning
Was the mighty Word.

2. Humbled for a season,

To receive a name
From the lips of sinners
Unto whom he came,
Faithfully he bore it
Spotless to the last,
Brought it back victorious,
When from death he passed:

3. Bore it up triumphant

With its human light,
Through all ranks of creatures
To the central height,
To the throne of Godhead,
To the Father's breast;
Filled it with the glory
Of that perfect rest.

4. In your hearts enthrone him;

There let him subdue
All that is not holy,
All that is not true;
Crown him as your Captain
In temptation's hour:
Let his will enfold you
In its light and power.

5. For this same Lord Jesus

Shall return again,

**With his Father's glory,
With his angel train;
All the wreaths of empire
Meet upon his brow,
And our hearts confess him
King of Glory now.**

© *Caroline Maria Noel* {1817 – 1877}

In our opening prayer, when I say, 'Amazing God', please respond with, 'All honour and glory are yours'. Let us pray.

Almighty God, we come to worship and adore you, for you not only brought the whole universe to life, but you love and sustain all living beings. We rejoice that when you raised Jesus from the grave, you reconciled sinners like us to you and broke the power of death.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Christ Jesus, loving, faithful Son of our heavenly Father, you brought our salvation by dying on a cross at Calvary to break the hold of Satan and atoning for the sins of the world.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Blessed Spirit, our Counsellor, Inspiration and Guide in our discipleship, we know that without you, we are helpless and hopeless. Come, lead us now and breathe new life into us.

'Amazing God' 'All honour and glory are yours'.

Mighty Lord of life and love, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you renew all things through the cross and empty tomb. Hear and accept our praise. **Amen.**

In our prayer of thanksgiving and confession, when I say, 'Merciful Lord', please respond with, 'Restore us to righteousness'.

Almighty God, we offer heartfelt thanks for all the many blessings we receive from you: for the good things we enjoy; for everyone who guides, loves and inspires us, but most of all for your undying love. Forgive us when we are selfish or self-righteous, unforgiving and judgmental. Pardon us when we have been unwilling to trust in your saving grace.

'Merciful Lord' 'restore us to righteousness'.

Help us to change our ways as we acknowledge our sinfulness. Renew and restore us, so our lives reflect the victory Jesus has won over sin and death. Re-ignite the embers of our faith, so we may play our part in building your kingdom here.

'Merciful Lord' 'restore us to righteousness'.

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. Hereafter, may we serve you and our neighbours gladly and faithfully, so our lives honour you 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.

We continue our worship with a hymn written by Charles Wesley in 1739. Its 'alleluias' were not added until 1852 – long after Charles had died! Hymn number 300, 'Hail the day that sees him rise'.

1. Hail the day that sees him rise, *Alleluia!*
Ravished from our wistful eyes! *Alleluia!*
Christ, awhile to mortals given, *Alleluia!*
Reascends his native heaven! *Alleluia!*
2. There the glorious triumph waits; *Alleluia!*
Lift your heads, eternal gates! *Alleluia!*
Wide unfold the radiant scene; *Alleluia!*
Take the King of Glory in! *Alleluia!*
3. Him through highest heaven receives, *Alleluia!*
Still he loves the earth he leaves; *Alleluia!*
Though returning to his throne, *Alleluia!*
Still he calls mankind his own: *Alleluia!*
4. See! he lifts his hands above; *Alleluia!*
See! he shows the prints of love: *Alleluia!*
Hark! his gracious lips bestow, *Alleluia!*
Blessings on his Church below. *Alleluia!*
5. Master, parted from our sight, *Alleluia!*
High above yon azure height, *Alleluia!*
Grant our hearts may thither rise, *Alleluia!*
Following thee beyond the skies. *Alleluia!*
6. Ever upward let us move, *Alleluia!*
Wafted on the wings of love; *Alleluia!*
Looking when our Lord shall come, *Alleluia!*
Longing, sighing after home. *Alleluia!*

© Charles Wesley (1707 – 1788)

In our prayers of intercession we pray for our world and its needs.

Loving God, 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 rectify the results of mankind's cruelty, folly, exploitation and indifference which result in so much suffering around the world.

We pray for our church, all churches in our Circuit and, indeed, for the World Church. Teach us to speak of the grace and glory of Christ Jesus with one voice and serve him in unity of mission. May we bear the gospel light to this suffering and sin-darkened world. Renew and invigorate our calling as we seek new ways to meet the needs of our communities as we emerge from the dark shadow of Coronavirus.

God of Shalom, we pray for peace throughout the world, though our attention is concentrated upon Ukraine and the invasion by Russia.

In your mercy Lord, reach out to the Ukrainian people, from President Zelenskyy and his advisors, the armed forces and militia, the civilians, mainly women, children, the elderly and disabled, who are trapped in cities that are being bombarded by Russian forces. May they remain courageous and undaunted, so they will be able to resist Russia's might. We pray that friendly countries will provide support not only during the war, but for the time it takes to rebuild Ukraine from the ashes of destruction.

Remember, too, Ukrainian refugees, who are fleeing to friendly countries. Bless those who offer shelter and support for as long as it is needed and may their compassion ease the trauma of the refugees.

Gracious Lord, inspire and guide the leaders of all nations and opposition groups in the way of peace. Teach them to eschew the use of violence to achieve their aims:

instead may they seek to follow the way of justice, mercy and peace. Teach us also to act justly and to care for our neighbours, especially people whom we find it difficult to like.

Lord, as we reflect upon our world and the serious issues our environment faces, we ask you to inspire and guide those who are striving to keeping earth habitable for future generations. We pray for people who campaign for a fair and proper use of the world's resources, including the distribution of coronavirus vaccines to impoverished countries and vaccines to counteract the recent outbreak of monkeypox.

We pray for organizations like All We Can and Christian Aid that are working to provide desperately-needed aid to Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen, where millions are facing starvation, because of famine. May governments also reach out to offer support, even if they disapprove of the regimes in those stricken lands.

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. We thank you for those who supply and run food banks and for organisations like the Salvation Army which help the poor. Speak to the hearts of the Government, business leaders and local councils so they may find ways of helping the poor and offer hope in place of bleak despair.

Lord, we remember before you people whose memories and faculties are diminishing because of a dementia and also their families, friends and carers whose distress has been increased by this pandemic. Grant all of them the support and hope they need to keep going.

We pray for neighbours who are sick in body, mind or spirit; those who are in any kind of need or trouble; neighbours who are living with depression or whose relationships have broken down and everybody who mourns the loss of somebody dear, particularly people who have been unable to mark their loved-one's passing because of restrictions at funerals and gatherings. In a time of silent reflection, we offer you names of people for whom we are especially concerned. Lord, help us to offer them both practical support and friendship, but warm them with your love, so they may find comfort, healing, courage and enduring peace.

Abba, Father God, bless us all, our families and friends. Keep us safe from harm and help us to lead Christ-centred lives by sharing your abundant love with all-comers, in the name of our risen and ascended Lord Jesus, to whom be glory and honour for evermore. Amen.

Our New Testament reading is Acts chapter 1 verses 15 to 17 and 21 to 26

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said,

"Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." Therefore, it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."

So they proposed two men: Joseph called Barsabbas (also known as Justus) and Matthias. Then they prayed,

"Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs." Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles. Amen.

The gospel reading is John chapter 17 verses 6 to 19 and is Jesus' prayer for his disciples – and us – during the Last Supper.

"I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them.

I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. Amen.

We continue with a hymn written by Revd. Norman Wallwork, a Methodist minister. I presume he has sat down by now, as he is a year older than me and I am rather ancient! If you don't recognize the words, I'm sure you will know its setting, 'Morning light', used for 'Stand up, stand up for Jesus'. Hymn number 315, 'We sing the praise of Jesus'

**1. We sing the praise of Jesus,
Of our ascending Lord;
The triumph of our Saviour,
Of Christ the Son of God.
The forty days are over,
Earth sees his face no more;
But Christ the King of glory
We worship and adore.**

**2. Rejoicing in God's promise
We wait in prayer and praise,
The Spirit sent from heaven
To set the earth ablaze;
We pray with expectation,
We praise with one accord,
We wait for living fire,
The power of the Lord.**

**3. Therefore, with saints and angels
And all the hosts above
We lift our hearts and voices
To bless the God of love;
To sing of our Redeemer
Who intercedes and prays,**

**That God the Holy Spirit
May guide us all our days.**

**4. With songs of alleluia
Let earth and heaven ring;
And praises to the Father
Let all creation sing.
All honour be to Jesus,
God's own eternal Son;
And to the Holy Spirit
Let endless praise be done!**

© Norman Wallwork (born 1946)

Sermon: waiting

Last Thursday was Ascension Day and today's reading from Acts deals with some of the events between Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Luke's gospel ended with Christ ascending to heaven, with his followers worshipping him and returning from Bethany to Jerusalem 'with great joy'. In the beginning of Acts, they stood, staring heavenwards until prompted to move by two figures clad in white. They had been told to stay in Jerusalem to receive the Holy Spirit, but they were not certain when this would be. They were joyful because they recognised in the ascension that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and he had fulfilled his mission to reconcile the human race to his Father, so he could resume his rightful place at God's right hand.

The eleven disciples, Mary, mother of Jesus, the women who'd faithfully followed Jesus and a large group of followers, one hundred and twenty in all, were staying in a room in Jerusalem, not only because the risen Lord had told them to wait there for the Holy Spirit, but because it was almost Shavuot – Pentecost is a Greek word – when Jews celebrate Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai. Jews from the Diaspora would have flocked to Jerusalem to worship in the temple and to give first-fruit offerings at the end of the barley-growing season. The coming of the Spirit at Shavuot / Pentecost would be of great significance, for in the new Covenant, salvation would not be gained through Law, but through faith in Jesus as our Saviour. Justification comes through Christ, not by animal sacrifices, for Jesus became the one perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Just before this reading, the disciples, male and female, prayed together, often 'with a single purpose in mind'. In Luke, they were said to have been constantly worshipping in the temple, but in that case the sexes would have been separated. Here, we have a united community of believers, praying together, sharing fellowship and waiting with conflicting feelings of expectation and dread. They were excited by Jesus' command to take Good News to the world, but felt totally inadequate to fulfil their commission. Peter declared that the time had come to find somebody to replace Judas Iscariot, not because of superstition, because of the significance of twelve in Hebrew culture. Twelve represents the sons and tribes of Israel – God's chosen people'; twelve apostles are therefore needed to build a new chosen people.

Notice how Peter stipulated that the person to replace Judas must have been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry to his ascension. In other words, he must have shared the whole ministry, so he would know the whole story and witness to it. Some commentators dislike the idea of lots to determine which of Joseph or Matthias should be chosen, but remember, they prayed for the Lord to guide them. Therefore, the use of lots left the decision in God's, not human, hands. Having chosen the twelfth man, they

continued in fellowship and prayer until the Spirit came to them. However, we can save that for next week's sermon.

Where does the passage from Acts leave us? We have effectively spent two years locked away because of COVID19. Like the disciples, we have experienced fear of family, friends or us coming to harm. We have had time to reflect on our lives and relationships, including our relationship with God. Many if not most of us will be joyful as Government restrictions come to an end, but that joy may be tinged with apprehension for the future. The disciples were also very apprehensive, so much so that the door of their room was bolted. They were painfully aware of their inadequacy to act in their own strength, yet they were joyful, too, because they knew of Christ's redeeming grace and power and they had the promise of the Holy Spirit so they could accomplish the Great Commission.

I hope we also know of Jesus' redemptive love and the capacity of the Spirit to guide and empower us, for the Great Commission is our responsibility today. Many of our churches have been active during the pandemic, but lockdown has provided opportunities for us to reflect upon what should happen as we return to a new normality. What changes do we need to make in worship and outreach? What practices are unproductive and ought to be abandoned? What new needs have we become aware of during coronavirus and how can we as a church, or as THE CHURCH, serve them? Our duty to bear the Christ-light is unchanged, but the way we carry it out – and our targets – may need to change. As we begin to open our churches again, let us rejoice in fellowship, praise God and engage in prayerful discussion, so we offer a Spirit-led response to our Saviour's call. Amen.

Our closing hymn was written in 1909 by Revd. Charles Silvester Horne, a Congregational Minister and father of the entertainer Kenneth Horne, best – known for the “Round the Horne” radio series. It was Revd. Horne's version of Charles Gabriel's ‘Glory Song’. We shall sing hymn number 185, ‘Sing we the King who is coming to reign’.

**1. Sing we the King who is coming to reign;
Glory to Jesus, the Lamb that was slain!
Life and salvation his empire shall bring,
Joy to the nations when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

*Come, let us sing: Praise to our King,
Jesus our King, Jesus our King:
This is our song, who to Jesus belong:
Glory to Jesus, to Jesus our King.*

**2. All shall be well in his kingdom of peace;
Freedom shall flourish and wisdom increase;
Justice and truth from his sceptre shall spring;
Wrong shall be ended when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**3. Souls shall be saved from the burden of sin;
Doubt shall not darken his witness within;
Hell has no terrors, and death has no sting;
Love is victorious when Jesus is King: *Chorus***

**4. Kingdom of Christ, for thy coming we pray;
Hasten, O Father, the dawn of the day
When this new song thy creation shall sing:**

Satan is vanquished, and Jesus is King: *Chorus* © *Charles Silvester Horne (1865 – 1914)*

Benediction

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